Discourse: The Journal of the SCASD

Volume 8 Article 6

2023

Argumentation for Critical Heterogenous Political Discussions: Constructing a Rebuttal

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Abstract

This activity seeks to explain to undergraduate students how to craft a proper attack and defense in argumentation and debate, persuasion, or political communication courses. The activity teaches students 1) the parts of a basic argument structure and 2) how to construct a rebuttal using a basic argument structure. Students will argue against their true political typology by selecting an opposing typology from the Pew Research Typology Quiz. Broadly, this exercise is designed to encourage students to engage in dialogues with people who disagree with their political positionality. Specifically, the activity accomplishes this by teaching students the value of basic argument structure in political discussions and is an extension of Zarefsky's work on teaching the practice of argumentation. Additionally, it incorporates recent scholarship on how post-pandemic online learning has impacted higher education and political polarization. As such, this activity can be used for in-person or online asynchronous modalities.

Courses

Argumentation and Debate
Persuasion
Political Communication

Introduction and Rationale

The following activity is designed to help students construct the rebuttal portion of debates in argumentation and debate, persuasion, and political communication courses. Broadly, this exercise is designed to encourage students to engage in dialogues with people who disagree with their political positionality. The outcome of this activity should leave the students affirming their existing beliefs with stronger, valid argument structures, questioning learning more about the beliefs of other positionalities, or changing their positionality as warranted by a valid argument structure for this new position. In sum, students should learn that having a logical argument that includes a claim, warrant, and evidence is a valuable tool for both defending their positions and having critical, respectful engagement with other positionalities.

In today's polarized political environment, equipping students with the means to engage in heterogeneous political discussions is essential. Through debate, students of argumentation can confirm existing beliefs, change their views, or better understand the opposition to deliberative decision-making. For example, Fassett and Atay (2022), in their scholarship that after spending nearly two years learning via Zoom, students are now more prone to pernicious

biases (p. 1). From Fassett's pedagogical insight, I use Zarefsky's (2019) textbook, *The Practice of Argumentation*: *Effective Reasoning in Communication*, as an example to build this activity to challenge students to deliberate on their pernicious biases.

In argumentation scholarship, additional practical exercises that connect argumentative and rhetorical theory to debate scenarios are needed. In short, Zarefsky's textbook excels the current standard for teaching argumentative structures, but it, like all texts, is imperfect. Zarefsky does provide activities that connect theory to practice. Zaresfky's text is thus useful for shortening the disconnect between theoretical written concepts and deliverables in communication education exacerbated by the pandemic (Rosetto and Martin, 2022, p. 4). However, these activities do not allow students to engage in discourse with those who disagree. Current argumentation pedagogical scholarship lacks recognition that students should be taught how to debate with heterogeneous, diverse groups. This methodological view of building student engagement is informative to analyzing the relationship-building between student and teacher and how public speaking should teach through the instructor's example of how students can best communicate with those different from them or their counterpublics (Fabian, 2019, p. 191). So, each step of the activity I have outlined here addresses three issues with Zarefsky's current approach to teaching how to attack argument schemes.

The first issue with Zarefsky's approach is that he discusses what claim, warrant, and evidence are without adequate attention to how crucial a strong warrant is. This activity is designed to show the linkage of the warrant as a license from claim to evidence. Specifically, this activity recommends attacking the warrant in subordinative and coordinative attacks. Second, Zarefsky does not discuss identifying the weakest point of an argument scheme. This activity asks students to identify the weak point and why that part of the argument scheme is invalid. Third, Zarefsky (2019) discusses what subordinative, coordinative, and multiple argument schemes are in introducing what arguments are but does not elaborate on how these structures can be used in an attack (p. 198). I advocate for students to use these argument scheme types as choices in the attack.

Oral performance classes provide a public forum for students to discuss topics about social identity that may otherwise be left unheard. Harris (2021) offers the perspective that communication educators have the opportunity to "rebalance" public discourse by encouraging students to listen to other viewpoints before crafting their responses (p. 442). Students become advocates for change in how we talk about our differences as they are equipped to use respectful, structured decorum. By completing this activity, students are prepared to enter heterogeneous communities and are engaged, deliberative citizens.

Objectives of Activity

Students should be able to:

1. Practice ethical argument construction.

2. Become thorough evaluators of argument structures.
3. Identify claims, warrants, and evidence in argument structures.
4. Strategically select attack options for argument structures, including subordinative, coordinative, and multiple.

Description of Activity

This activity has three parts. The first step is for the student to take the Pew Research Typology quiz to determine their typology. Second, students should argue against their typology by selecting another one that opposes their own. Students should choose *one* issue to argue for or against from the position of their opposing typology. Students should write a contention or main point paragraph that could theoretically be a part of a larger speech. This contention should be written using a claim, warrant, evidence argument structure to rebuttal their true political beliefs. Third, and finally, students should take a survey ranking the argument validity of their classmate's contentions anonymously. This activity should be concluded with a discussion of whether, by arguing against their beliefs, students affirmed, changed, or remained the same in their beliefs on the issue they chose.

Procedure/Steps

Note: The steps in this section should be completed online regardless of course modality. If this is an in-person course, students should do this portion online before the class meets in person.

Students should preferably take the Pew Research Center Political Typology Quiz individually in an isolated environment.

Students should attempt to write a speech supporting a Pew Typology position that differs from the result they received from taking the test. For example, the “Outsider Left” might write a speech advocating for the “Ambivalent Right.”

Students should select *one* issue that they disagree with their chosen opposition about.

Students should then argue against themselves on this issue. They should do this by constructing a rebuttal contention to their typology from the positionality of their typological opposition. Students should *not* put their names on their contention draft. It should be explained to students that a “contention” is essentially a main point within a speech.

Once students have finished writing, they should share their contentions for anonymous review. Contentions should be submitted anonymously through Google Forms. Students should identify by the name of the typology the contention is written from the position of. To ensure submission, students may screenshot confirmation of their response submission and submit it to their LMS

submission portal. The instructor should set this assignment's due date at least two class meetings before the in-person discussion or, for online sections, a week before the discussion board is due.

The instructor will then import Google Form responses into a Qualtrics form that allows students to rank the contentions on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest. The instructor should post this Qualtrics survey for students the day after the due date for the contention submission. The submission of this survey should be due, at minimum, the day before the in-person class meeting or a day before the discussion board is due for online modalities.

Instructions for this Qualtrics survey should read that while reviewing contentions; students should evaluate the contention not for their agreement or disagreement with the issues presented but for the strength of the argument structure.

The completion of writing the contention and reviewing another student's contention should be followed by a discussion addressed in the section titled "Debrief" below.

The total activity time for in-person discussion is 20-25 minutes.

Debriefing

Note: This can be posted as a discussion board for online modalities.

Students should be asked by the instructor, "Did your position change, stay the same, or become stronger? Why and how?"

Lastly, the instructor should close the activity by explaining to the students that the primary takeaways were as follows:

1) To allow students to critically re-evaluate their political positionality by attempting to argue for the other side.

2) To allow students to evaluate arguments for validity without allowing personal bias to control their evaluations solely.

3) Show students how and why some arguments are more effective than others by listening to how students rank others' argument structures.

Appraisal

Strengths:

This activity allows students to examine their political beliefs critically by learning valid argument structure. Due to its anonymity and the requirement to argue from the student's

opposition viewpoint, the activity accounts for the possibility that classes might be largely homogeneous.

Weaknesses:
This activity requires that students put aside their biases when ranking arguments. Though they are instructed to rank the argument and not their agreement with it, they still might allow bias to skew results.

Conclusion

This activity addresses students' political positionalities by giving a systematic structure of steps to follow in selecting what arguments to attack and how. Students of diverse backgrounds are honored and given tools to argue their positionality and liberated from the weak, hegemonic discourse that cannot withstand their argumentative critiques by expressing their political views and providing a structured argument for those views.

References

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Appendix (if applicable)

Handout aid for writing the contention

Step 1: Identify the parts of the primary argument scheme for your positionality. (Parts include:

Claim, warrant, and evidence).

Explanation:

Claim- This is your assertion in response to the controversy at hand.

Warrant- This is a statement that links your claim to your evidence. It provides validation for why the evidence supports your claim.

Evidence- This is a fact, statistic, or testimony that supports your claim.

Step 2: Identify weaknesses in each part of each contention's argument scheme: claim, warrant, and evidence. Reference what makes each part weak from the above instructions. For example:

Claims are weak when: They do not adequately support or contradict the premise of your main argument.

Warrants are weak when: They do not justify why you are using the source (evidence) for your claim.

Evidence is weak when: The source lacks credibility or verifiability.

Step 3: Identify if you want to attack just one or multiple parts of the argument scheme. There are 3 types of attacks Subordinative, Coordinative, and Multiple.

Example:

Subordinative: You attack one part. For example, just the warrant.

Coordinative: You attack two parts. For example, the warrant and evidence.

Multiple: You attack all aspects. For example, the claim, warrant, and evidence.

Step 4: Write your response about why the parts of the argument scheme you chose from above are weak. Do this for each contention.

Step 5: Write a question for your opponent that points out the weaknesses you identified in Step 4.

Example:

Contention 1: I chose a subordinative attack on the warrant.
I identified the warrant was weak because…
So, my question is: Why do you cite the evidence of Y when your justification for your claim of X does not result in Z?