Teaching Argument

Many students likely define “argument” as simply a verbal fight between two people, and therefore, as a necessary step toward enhancing our students’ sophistication as writers and cultivating their ability to argue, we need to expand their sense of what constitutes an argument and how argument functions in communities, especially the academic community. On one hand, we must help them to understand that, as Andrea Lunsford titled her recent textbook, “Everything’s an Argument.” That is, we need to help them see how, for example, visual images celebrate and implicitly advocate a certain worldview, a set of values and assumptions, and, at the same time, criticize alternatives; how stories and seemingly objective reports similarly foreground a particular point-of-view and advance certain claims; how all language, as Richard Weaver famously claimed, is “sermonic.” On the other hand, we need to concretize their sense of effective argumentative strategies and give them meaningful opportunities to practice using these strategies more and more ambitiously. In fact, as long as people have taught writing, they have done so to prepare their students for participation in public discourse – that is, for argument as the very life-blood of community, regardless of how much different communities might vary in defining what counts as an argument.

We can accomplish this through any number of strategies. Here are a few you might adapt for your own classroom.

- Sketch for you students and discuss with them the major approaches to argument – Aristotle’s, Stephen Toulmin’s, Chaim Perelman’s, Carl Rogers’s. Talk with them about the various forms of appeal (ethos, pathos, logos, kairos, and so on) and use these to organize yet subtler considerations of the various kinds of evidence, the various occasions and purposes for argument, the different forms of argument and the ways different media shape arguments.
- Create a “casebook” of different arguments about some particular issue. Ask your students to identify the technical differences in how the arguments are made; or have them use the arguments as the basis for developing their own arguments; or have them use the authors of some of the pieces as an imaginary audience against whom they can argue; have them revise some of these arguments to fit an approach or model different from the one in which they were originally written; or have them argue for which of the arguments is most successful.
- Collect a set of both “canonical” and contemporary examples of powerful, carefully disciplined argument -- excerpts from, say, Plato, Thomas More, Jonathan Swift, Virginia Woolf, Martin Luther King, plus selections from recent newspaper editorial pages – and ask students to identify the formal, technical properties of these arguments and then to develop careful imitations of them.
- Explore with your students the various logical fallacies that can weaken an argument, even undermine it altogether. (If you google ‘fallacies,’ you’ll find long lists of them with helpful examples). Also discuss with your students the other sorts of problems that can weaken an argument and develop examples of what-not-to-do.