

Parlez-vous Arguespeak?

Gerald Graff

Our ten year old son Aaron asked us the other day to buy him a #9910 model Nerf Gun and we immediately refused. But then Aaron reminded us that we had promised the gun to him a couple of weeks earlier if he cleaned up his room, as he had. As usual, he was right. Like most kids, Aaron is an excellent debater when his interests are at stake, and he's devilishly quick at pouncing on his parents' contradictions. It sometimes seems as if half of Aaron's sentences begin, "But you *said....*"

Not that Aaron's argumentative skills are very advanced. He seems only recently to have reached the developmental stage of realizing that other minds see the world differently from his and that, when he's asked why he likes something, "because I like it" is not a helpful answer. But Aaron makes up in persistence for what he lacks in conceptual sophistication. There are few propositions that Aaron won't fiercely contest, whether it's that he should take a bath or that he's watching too much TV.

But then, how could Aaron and other children *not* learn to argue at very early ages, seeing that making arguments is one of the few means they have of getting their needs met in a world where older and bigger people call most of the shots, and making arguments is a step up from throwing a tantrum. For this reason, you might think Aaron's school would be tapping into his argumentative skills as a means of drawing Aaron into his academic tasks. But it isn't. Aaron's curriculum is focused mostly on learning information and concepts with little invitation to build on those argument skills or to enter into debates. If anything, Aaron's curriculum sends a message that arguing is something troublemakers do and that students need to check at the classroom door.

I suspect that if we looked at high school students who are failing in school and will soon drop out, we would find that many of those students who are apathetic in their classrooms are smart and articulate arguers in the schoolyard and the playground—in some cases smarter and more articulate than their classmates who are getting better grades. Yet these students too have got the message that arguing and debating have nothing to do with school.

Of course educators could be forgiven if they worry that arguing and debating are dangerously close to fighting and bullying, things that many boys and some girls are already all too prone to do. This way of thinking is certainly understandable in the wake of the Columbine and Sandy Hook massacres and other forms of school violence. Even so, it still seems that educators are missing a great opportunity when we keep the curriculum free of argument and debate, including the opportunity to induce violence prone students to channel their aggressive impulses from fighting with fists, guns, and slurs to fighting with words and ideas.

For these reasons, the new Common Core State Standards seem very promising to me since they present argument, rightly in my view, as *the* most

important skill for “college and career readiness,” and mandate that students demonstrate argument skills at appropriate levels all the way from pre-K and Kindergarten to the senior year in high school. Here is how the authors of the Standards put it in Research Appendix A, entitled “The Special Place of Argument in the Standards”: PPOINT

the Standards put particular emphasis on students' ability to write sound arguments on substantive topics and issues, as this ability is critical to college and career readiness. English and education professor Gerald Graff writes that “argument literacy” is fundamental to being educated. The university is largely an “argument culture,” Graff contends; therefore, K-12 schools should “teach the conflicts” so that students are adept at understanding and engaging in argument (both oral and written) when they enter college. He claims that because argument is not standard in most school curricula, only 20 percent of those who enter college are prepared in this respect...When teachers ask students to consider two or more perspectives on a topic or issue, something far beyond surface knowledge is required. Students must think critically and deeply, assess the validity of their own thinking, and anticipate counterclaims in opposition to their own thinking. [I AGREE WITH GRAFF HERE]

Furthermore, the Standards highlight a particular *kind* of argument in which students make claims not in isolation—as in the five-paragraph theme kind of argument—but in debate with others, whether these others are the authors of assigned texts or their classmates and teachers.

The Standards, in short, encourage the kind of argument that Cathy Birkenstein and I, in the title of our writing textbook, call “They Say/I Say” argument, a kind in which students are as much concerned with listening to what “they say” as they are with expressing their own arguments, in which first listening to and summarizing what others say, in fact, helps them form their own arguments.

PPOINT FIGURE 1/FIGURE 2

Note that in Figure 2 the same claim undergoes a sea change when framed as a response to something “they say”—it now suddenly has a point, a reason why it needed to be made in the first place.

PPOINT OF 11TH-12TH GRADE STANDARDS—

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

- a. Introduce precise, **knowledgeable** claim(s), **establish the significance of the claim(s)**, distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that **logically sequences** claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.
- b. Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly **and thoroughly**, supplying **the most relevant** evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience's knowledge level, concerns, **values, and possible biases**.

Learning to engage in Figure 2 argument—where you develop your thesis not in isolation, but in response to “alternative views,” as the Standards put it, is particularly important for students’ cognitive development, since it forces them to recognize that they live in a diverse world where others will often think very differently from the way they do.

To sum up, then, two points, and they both offer persuasive reasons for curricular debate, or the infusion of argument and debate into the regular school curriculum, making debate not just an extracurricular activity for students who elect to join the competitive debate team, but something students engage in all the time in every academic subject. One, schools need to start tapping into the native argument skills that students bring with them from home, the playground, and the schoolyard and show students how to transfer those argument skills into their academic work to make themselves more college and career ready. Two, the Common Core Standards now not only mandate that schools do just that, highlight argument skills as central to the curriculum across all the subjects, but give us a picture of what the student outcomes should look like if we are successful in highlighting argument.

But of course we wouldn’t be here today if it were all that easy to tap into students’ latent argument and debate skills and channel those skills into academic work. The Common Core Standards expressly leave it to teachers and schools to figure out *how* to infuse argument and debate into the curriculum, to “debatify” it, so to speak. And here it seems to me there are at least three formidable obstacles that we will need to overcome if we’re going to debatifize the curriculum successfully.

1. Shakespeare is not Family Guy. It’s one thing for students to use their home grown argumentation skills in a schoolyard debate with their friends about the merits of Family Guy and Beyonce, about whether the Chicago Bulls can defeat the Miami Heat in the NBA playoffs if they get Derrick Rose back, or about which platform shoes are the coolest. It is quite another thing to transfer those home grown skills to a classroom debate about competing interpretations of Macbeth or the implications of urbanization or automation. Many of our students won’t need to be persuaded to *care* about Beyonce or the Bulls, but it’s often not at all obvious to them how Shakespeare or the sociology of cities figure to matter in their lives.

For this reason, instead of plunging students immediately into academic debates about Shakespeare or sociology, it’s a good idea to have them first debate topics *they* care about and then gradually, when they’ve had some time to get comfortable with the practices of argumentation in your classroom, transition from those debates over to debates about your academic subjects. George Hillocks and his students call this tactic using “gateway activities,” introducing students into academic practices by first modeling those practices on topics students are already interested in. In devising such gateway activities it seems an advantage to be teaching the social sciences, since virtually any subject your students care about can be viewed through a sociological or historical lens. For example, a debate about what they like or don’t like about Family Guy can be gradually turned into a debate about

how parents and children are represented in the program and in the American popular media more generally, with supplementary readings and other materials on that latter topic. Similarly, student debates on cars or sports teams or clothing fashions can be ratcheted up into higher level intellectual debates on the social and cultural meanings of Americans' enthusiasm for these things.

2. Arguespeak Is a Foreign Language. But of course that can be the big challenge, to move students from debates about cars and other things they care about to the sociological meanings of car culture and other topics we are supposed to teach. It seems obvious to students that cars are important, but it doesn't seem at all obvious why *intellectualizing about cars* is at all important or that such intellectualizing figures to help them in their lives. On the contrary, using phrases like "social and cultural meanings" might well get them ostracized as a snob or a nerd by their friends, and inducing students to try out the highbrow *language* in which intellectual debate is conducted is the second obstacle to getting students to transfer their argument skills to their academic work. Public sphere argument is conducted in a special language that most students aren't familiar with and may not see the point of learning to speak and write.

This public or academic language is the language that, in the title of this talk and elsewhere, I call "Arguespeak." It's actually not just a language, but a whole way of thinking that demands control of rigorous logic and elaborate conventions. I've been talking Arguespeak here in this talk, and we will all speak a version of it in the Q and A. Arguespeak is not just the language of academia and academic research, but also of opinion journalism, of the op ed pages and the TV talking heads on CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News, of the policy analysts and opinion shapers, of the advertising and corporate elite. It's essentially the Power Discourse of our culture that educational writers like Lisa Delpit and others have argued, rightly in my view, our students badly need to learn, and the more "at risk" or "disadvantaged" the students are the more they need to learn it.

The problem, as we all know, is that there's a huge gap between the formally correct language of Arguespeak and the so-called "home" languages of kids and adolescents, and the gap is often just as wide for middle class white students from the suburbs as it is for inner city black and Hispanic students. I stumbled on this fact in an embarrassing way a few years ago when I realized I that I couldn't necessarily tell which of my students were non-native English speakers or not on the basis of their writing. I had a student who, on the basis of her writing and ethnic appearance, I assumed was a non-native English speaker. But when I said as much in an office conference with her—"I assume English isn't your first language"—she became indignant and said, "What are you talking about, Dr. Graff? I grew up in Skokie!" I realized as I quickly apologized that she she had a second language problem, all right, but that the second language she was struggling with was not English but Arguespeak or academic intellectual English.

One conclusion I've come to from such experiences is that since Arguespeak is virtually a foreign language, it makes sense to teach it as a foreign language. It is after all almost as unfamiliar and exotic to most American students as French or Urdu. And just as we teach French or Urdu by being explicit about their forms, usages, and conventions, we should be equally explicit about those of Arguespeak. We can't assume, that is, that our students will pick up Arguespeak by osmosis through reading model examples of it or listening to us teachers talk it at them, though students do need to see models of what Arguespeak looks like if we expect them to produce that kind of discourse themselves. This is why I think the Common Core Standards' shift of emphasis from fictional to "informational" texts is a good thing.

My major way of being explicit about Arguespeak is represented in the argument templates that Cathy Birkenstein and I feature in *They Say/I Say*, which claim to represent "the moves" students need to learn to make to enter debates about ideas. Our premise is that participants in such debates recycle a common set of moves, moves that are so widely used that they can be represented in fill in the blank form that students can use right away and thereby acquire the "foreign" language they don't already possess:

POINT OF 12-13 TEMPLATES [cf figure 2]

Cathy and my workshop this afternoon will discuss teaching with these templates, but I invite questions here in the post-talk Q & A.

One of the benefits of giving students templates like these is that students who use them in their writing will start noticing them in their reading. One good classroom game is to ask students to "spot the 'they say'" in any text—not the argument the author is making, but whom or what he or she is making it against or what motivates him or her to make it. Another is to take any text at random and ask students to play "templatize this" with it—bracket its content and isolate its rhetorical "moves." Here for example is what a passage I just read looks like when templatized:

One conclusion I've come to from _____ is that _____ since _____ is _____, it makes sense to _____. It is after all _____. And just as we _____, we should _____. We can't assume, that is, that _____, though _____. This is why I think _____ is a good thing.

You may be surprised at how your students' writing improves once they gain command of formal Arguespeak phrases like these, which will generate content ideas that students didn't know they had.

3. Two big obstacles, then, to helping our students actualize their arguing and debating skills in our courses are, one, the difficulty of transitioning from schoolyard debates about things students care about to academic debates about the subjects we care about; and, two, the gap between the everyday language of most

students and the often alien Arguespeak in which public debate takes place. But there is a third obstacle to drawing students into the academic and public argument culture, and it may be the most formidable one of all, and that obstacle is...us.

No, I'm not engaging in teacher bashing: I mean us *collectively*, not individually—for part of the problem is that we are too prone to think of teaching as a solo enterprise—"my course," "my classroom"—instead of as a team effort. And I don't mean team teaching so much as a coordinated curriculum in which teachers are on the same page enough to convey a common message to students, which would be that academic work is above all about arguing and debating, not just about knowing a lot of stuff. That's not because knowing a lot of stuff is unimportant, but because knowing a lot of stuff won't get you very far unless you are able to turn what you know into an argument in a debate.

Unfortunately, we've programmed students and their parents for generations now, if not centuries, to believe that education is not about entering into debates about ideas, but is rather about knowing a lot of stuff that you memorize and give back on an exam. It's going to be difficult to de-program students and parents from this information-oriented picture of education as long as argument and debate crop up only in an occasional course or two. In other words, curricular debate doesn't figure to transform students' work unless it is in fact really *curricular* rather than occasional and intermittent, and to become truly a curricular presence curricular debate needs to be a project of the entire teaching staff, one that's reinforced across every subject rather than something students get a taste of in a morning class and then forget about once they get to their classes in the afternoon.

Argument and debate, in short, are the best candidates to provide students with a consistency of experience from course to course and teacher to teacher. When such consistency is lacking, as it too often is now, students often find themselves starting over from scratch whenever they start a new course, and they can't build their argument and debate skills cumulatively and incrementally. It's difficult to create this kind of consistency and continuity when we teach in separate classrooms, even with plenty of lesson plans and faculty meetings that aim to get us to coordinate.

I believe that commonality and consistency would be easier to achieve if schools had some common school-wide events that addressed controversial issues that students would be encouraged to debate, [One model is Deborah Meier's Central Park East Schools in Harlem described in her book, The Power of Their Ideas, in which teachers debated constantly in front of students to draw students into the debates. It's not easy to replicate Meier's conditions, but one step in that direction would be for schools to stage all-school debates in their assembly halls that would create a common culture of debate in the school, the kind of common culture unfortunately that has been created only football and basketball games. It might seem utopian, but it's intriguing to imagine a whole student body excited by a common

academic debate the way it now gets excited when one of its sports teams makes the playoffs.

Such all school debates do actually break out whenever a major crisis or disaster hits the nation. The writer John Austin has pointed out the curious fact that such disasters and crises periodically create something like a common national curriculum in this country—the O. J. Simpson trial, the September 11 terrorist attacks, the Columbine and Newtown shootings—events that become so big and prominent nationally or internationally through cable TV and the web that they are taken up by schools as teachable moments that get students and teachers talking to one another across different subjects and courses. But then once the crisis fades away we crawl back to the privacy of our separate classrooms, to wait until the next crisis brings us together again.

Instead of waiting that way, schools might start initiating all-school debates on controversial public issues right now. Something like this actually occurred in 1992, when Spike Lee's film Malcolm X appeared and one enterprising Chicago High School, realizing that many of its students were skipping school anyway in order to see the film, organized a discussion in the school auditorium on the issues raised by the film about the state of race relations in America and what to do about it. Today the national debates over gun control in the wake of the massacre at Newtown and earlier school shootings, would be an obvious topic for an all school debate, which could be student led. So would current debates about economic policy—the case to be made for higher taxes and more government spending or for lower taxes and smaller government. Such all school debates, moreover, would figure not just to get students excited about intellectual issues while training them to discuss such issues more competently, they would function as professional development activities for teachers, who would learn from one another how to use debate as a pedagogical tool.

I'll end as I began with another story about Aaron, our ten year old. One day when Aaron was three and just starting to talk, he threw his food off his high chair all over the floor. Before his parents could start scolding him, however, Aaron preempted us by saying "Good boy! Good boy!" We realized that Aaron was already learning to make arguments in anticipation of counterarguments—Figure 2 arguments, if you will. We realized that children learn to argue even as they are learning to talk—how else can they make their way in the world? That's not to say that Aaron's arguments were *good* arguments—as we quickly pointed out to him, repetitively saying "Good boy" doesn't make you one—but that's another matter. The point is that all kids develop this latent argument skill virtually out of the cradle, and we educators are missing a huge opportunity if we don't take advantage of it. Thank you.

