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Textbook Review

The Aims of Argument: A Text and Reader

In her essay “Taking TV’s “War of Words” Too Literally,”<sup>1</sup> Georgetown University linguist Deborah Tannen examines the rise of what she calls the “argument culture.” That argument is a significant part of American culture today is clear whenever we turn on the television set. Talking heads that populate the airwaves with ardent speakers can be found on various talk shows, especially cable’s quasi-news programs such as MSNBC’s Hardball or CNN’s Crossfire. These speakers vehemently proclaim their opinions about the big issues of our day, aggressively arguing their position on everything from abortion, to gay marriage, to terrorism and its causes. These programs and their speakers engage in the kind of aggressive verbal swordplay that Tannen refers to, and while it may be entertaining, as viewers we don’t really get a sense of how well reasoned the espoused arguments are.

In fact, most savvy viewers soon realize that the verbal combatants featured on cable TV are engaged in only one kind of argumentation: persuasion. These speakers want to persuade us to see their point of view, and will employ whatever rhetorical device necessary to sway our opinion, including, perhaps, being less than truthful in detailing the facts of a given dispute, or employing strident emotional appeals that disregard any sense of reason. But there is more than one form of argumentation than persuasion, despite the fact that most people, and especially college students, are rarely conscious of those other forms. How can students learn about and differentiate between methods and aims of argumentation so that they can become knowledgeable participants in public debates? How do they avoid falling into the argument culture trap, a trap that seemingly values only confrontation and not genuine dialogue? What can college instructors do to help mold students into reflective thinkers, giving them the skills to

recognize spurious arguments when they see them? Well, the first step in answering these questions is to introduce college students to Timothy W. Crusius and Carolyn E. Channell's excellent college-level reader, The Aims of Argument: A Text and Reader.<sup>2</sup>

The Aims of Argument takes a holistic approach toward argumentation that mirrors the structure of James E. Kinneavy's 1969 essay "The Basic Aims of Discourse."<sup>3</sup> Crusius and Channell have developed a textbook designed around the purposes or aims of argument, which they define as to inquire, to convince, to persuade, and to negotiate. The Aims of Argument is philosophically and theoretically based upon an epistemic pedagogy that encompasses Chris Anson's view that college level writing and reading is a reflective process that seeks to develop well-rounded, thoughtful readers and writers. It is a process that works toward the notion that "[a]n idea or belief is just a resting place in the quest for Truth. It is the importance that the learner gives to the process of this question, and not the Truth itself, that marks him or her as intellectually mature."<sup>4</sup> Truth is provisional and must be tested and challenged through a dialectical process of inquiry that weighs all sides of an argument. As Crusius and Channell explicitly state, it is their opinion that the "Truth is not simply "out there" in some wordless realm waiting to be discovered; rather . . . we discover or uncover truth as we grapple with a controversial issue and that it results largely from how we interpret ourselves and our world." From this process, then, knowledge is gained and, based upon a approach that views "[a]rgumentation [as] a mode or means of discourse,"<sup>5</sup> students can be taught to be reflective and knowledgeable participants in public discourse, learning through the practice of critical reading and writing, to avoid (and recognize) the ubiquitous argument culture that permeates American society today.

Central to this pedagogical and theoretical framework is the author’s emphasis on inquiry or research as the primary aim in argumentation. The text, however, is structured in such a way that the student does not encounter inquiry until Part Two, Chapter 6, “Looking for Some Truth: Arguing to Inquire.” Instead, Crusius and Channell focus the first five chapters on what they call “basic training.” Chapter 1 begins with a definition of argument and rhetoric, followed by a detailed essay example, which is then followed by an important and valuable section on the “Four Criteria of Mature Reasoning,” a section that stresses the need for a thoughtful and reasoned approach to argumentation. At this point, the four aims of argument are introduced to the student. Chapter 2 launches the student into reading arguments and how to analyze them, followed by a Chapter that further guides students through the analysis process. Chapter 4, “Reading and Writing about Visual Arguments,” is especially interesting in that it incorporates the kind of media-based arguments that most students encounter in their daily lives. In Chapter 5, students are led through the process of writing research-based arguments, which includes detailed discussions and helpful guidelines on finding, evaluating, and using sources.

Part Two begins with Chapter 6, the unit on inquiry. The authors have built this chapter around the exploratory essay. Piloting students through a writing project recursively designed in three major parts, the authors have developed a sequenced, step-by-step writing process that allows instructors to take their young writers through the initial inquiry process, including detailed suggestions on how to come up with topic ideas, how to use dialogue to question opinions (exemplified in articles from Newsweek), and how to conduct a critical analysis of a written text. If desired, instructors can utilize the blue-boxed “Follow Through” inserts that follow each discussion to guide their students through sequenced assignments. For example, “Follow Through” tasks encourage students to write a dialogue on their topic, to engage in small

group discussions about those dialogues, to engage in pre-writing exercises, or to write an evaluation of a source. The blue-boxed “Questions for Inquiry” guideline is particularly useful, offering both the instructor and the student specific, detailed questions with which to analyze any given text.

Crusius and Channell believe that inquiry, based on Aristotelian and Platonic dialectic, should be taught as a foundational skill, an aim separate from persuasion, convincing, or negotiating, because it teaches students to “think through their arguments and imagine reader reaction.” It serves to teach students how to “engage in constructive dialogue,” that allows them to think thoroughly about their positions and received opinions, reaching an understanding that is “crucial to convincing and persuading.” Moreover, inquiry goes “hand-in-hand with research which . . . normally precedes writing in other aims of argument.”<sup>6</sup> And to help students get started with research, the authors have included two large sections incorporating a variety of texts that offer differing perspectives on major issues that the authors have found the students to be most interested in: class, race, and gender. These sections encompass Part Three, and specifically focus on the family and on terrorism. Part Four includes a collection of essays on topics ranging from Feminism to Contemporary Culture. The Aims of Argument closes out the textbook with an Appendix on proofreading and editing, and includes a glossary for good measure.

As a mixed reader and rhetoric, The Aims of Argument has much to offer the instructor. Based on the premise that reading and writing, and writing argumentation specifically, is the best way a student gains knowledge about him or herself and the world around them (thus enabling them to fully participate in the public debates of our time), the textbook offers an effective and constructive sequence-based approach to teaching writing. The book is somewhat limited,

however, by its very specificity. Unless you are in a program offering a semester or quarter unit specifically geared toward argumentation, The Aims of Argument will not serve. Instruction on genre-specific writing or creative writing, for example, two areas that many instructors may wish to incorporate into their classes, is left out. And given the size of the textbook, especially considering the inclusion of the casebooks, the cost of the text may be prohibitive given its narrow focus. However, The Aims of Argument is available in a shortened version without the casebooks (see <[www.mhhe.com/crusius](http://www.mhhe.com/crusius)> for information on this shortened version and other instructional aids). Overall, The Aims of Argument is a thorough and well-designed textbook. It effectively guides students through the process of learning how to develop successful written arguments, how to conduct meaningful and useful research, and how to hone their reasoning skills. And instructors will value the textbook's wonderfully practical assignment sequences, useful examples, and abundant readings. I highly recommend The Aims of Argument for instructors interested in teaching the art of argument.

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Tannen. "Taking TV's "War of Words" Too Literally." Exploring Language. Ed. Gary Goshgarian. 10<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Pearson, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy W. Crusius and Carolyn E. Channell. The Aims of Argument: A Text and Reader. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> James E. Kinneavy. "The Basic Aims of Discourse." College Composition and Communication. 20.4 (December 1969): 297-304.

<sup>4</sup> Anson, Chris M., ed. Writing and Response: Theory, Practice and Research. Chapter 16: "Response Styles and Ways of Knowing." Urbana: NCTE, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Crusius ix-x.

<sup>6</sup> Crusius ix.