Tools of Reason: Argumentation Theory's Relevance for the Curriculum

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Abstract

We should begin by considering the meaning of "Argumentation" and why it is an important component for curricula. Argumentation can be described as the means of how people reason collaboratively or competitively on any topic where information, knowledge, or claims conflict or are inconsistent.

Argumentation Studies itself is an interdisciplinary subject, with relevance to linguistics, computational linguistics, logic, computational semantics, rhetoric, and abstract argumentation, as well as application in artificial intelligence, law, and policy. And, of course, it has a particular relevance for education, because it provides the tools by which reason can come alive in the classroom and a particular kind of tolerant, reflective person can emerge.

This last point can also be seen in the goals that argumentation is used to achieve. Beyond the goals of persuasion, uncovering truth, negotiation, consensus, understanding, inquiry and advocacy, there is the all-important goal of educational development by which the right kinds of dispositions are encouraged in the characters of students.

But before we consider this further, I want to emphasize something about the history of the subject.

1958: A Tale of Two Books:

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Part One: The State of the Art.

Introduction:

In 1958, English philosophy was dominated by analytic thought and ordinary language philosophy. In Belgium, the influences were much broader, including the metaphysics of people like Jean-Paul Sartre. We would have every reason to expect scholars in these places to be working on very different kinds of project.

This is what makes so remarkable the clear similarities between two of the major works that appeared in that year—Stephen Toulmin's *The Uses of Argument* and Chaim Perelman's (with Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca) *Traité de l'argumentation: La nouvelle rhétorique*. Toulmin wrote his influential book during the few years he spent at the University of Leeds; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca spent more than a decade in Brussels on the research that would result in their major tome. Both works introduce a theory of argumentation (Toulmin implicitly; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca explicitly) in response to the traditions of logic that they believed (independently) had failed to provide a model of argument adequate to the needs of everyday reasoning and in particular, that could deal with *values*. Both books drew their inspiration from the jurisprudential models of reasoning. And both expanded the range of what would count under the label 'the logic of argument'.

These two works have become seminal texts in argumentation theory, an interdisciplinary field that did not exist at that time. Over the intervening decades, they have been added to what has emerged as one of the more interesting, innovating, and relevant literatures of the academy.

Emergence of the Triad:

Toulmin's work drew heavily on the traditions of logic and has come to influence the logical approach to argumentation. Perelman's work aimed to amend and extend Aristotle's work on rhetoric and has come to influence the rhetorical approach to argumentation. And for various reasons, both of them have been associated with the dialectical approach to argumentation.

In dividing things in this way, I appeal to the Aristotelian triad of logic, rhetoric and dialectic (Wenzel, 1980). Aristotle's triad has encouraged a focus on three aspects of argumentation: the product, the procedure, and the process. The product can be associated with the *logical* approach, concerned as it is with arguments themselves. The procedure can be associated with the *dialectical* approach to argumentation, concerned as it is with the rules that underlie argumentation and guarantee its rationality. The process can be associated with the *rhetorical* approach, concerned as it is with the communicative processes inherent in argumentation. Any theory of argumentation must in some way accommodate all three, but different approaches tend to lay the emphasis on one of the three as the most important or foundational (depending on the goals attributed to argumentation).

Argumentation theory clearly owes much to Aristotle, even if the "field" itself lay fallow for a number of centuries. Much of what has gone on in the last few decades in terms of the *history* of argumentation theory has involved a recovery of the Aristotelian roots. Perelman was a leader in this, but the impetus has been there across the perspectives. Perhaps among the exceptions we should place van Eemeren (2010) and his skepticism about the recourse to Aristotle[1] (it seems too close to the uncritical esteem in which he was held for so long, recognized as "the Philosopher"), but even he traces several threads to their Aristotelian origins. Many of us experienced our initiation into the study of logic via the Aristotelian syllogism, and the dialectical methods of his *Topics* apparently reflected the dialectical procedures of the Academy, principles of which are familiar to us through the Socratic Method. The *Rhetoric* was less studied by philosophers, at least in the Anglo-American analytic tradition. But its first two books connect with Aristotelian logic and dialectic before making the separate case for the serious study of rhetoric—a study tempered by connections to both the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

It is a natural feature of any discipline or field to identify its history. Anchoring one's interests in a tradition of ideas gives those interests both credibility and authority. It shows that what is at issue is no passing fad, but a coherent body of connected issues

and themes. Aristotle is, of course, not the only significant figure in that history,[2] but he is an easily identifiable one. Add to him Cicero, Locke, Bacon, and the list goes on. Proponents of each perspective on argumentation agree generally on a subject matter that covers reasoning in its natural habitat, that is the social, scientific and academic environments in which it occurs.

Argumentation theorists have developed a concern with what might be called "best practices," as they offer both normative and descriptive principles to improve argumentation wherever it occurs. Some of the more interesting theoretical work has grown out of initial interests with pedagogy, particularly where there are connections with critical thinking.

Representatives of the Perspectives and Their Principal Contributions:

I can illustrate some of the points of the last section by taking representatives of the three perspectives and discussing what they have contributed to the current 'state of the art'. I will look at informal logic, pragma-dialectics, and rhetorical argumentation, recognizing, of course, that this will be a very selective survey that omits as much of importance as it is able to include.

My home institution, the University of Windsor, derives its fame in the field by virtue of being the place where Tony Blair and Ralph Johnson developed informal logic in the 1970s, famously acknowledged by Habermas in the first volume of his theory of communicative action (1984). Blair and Johnson have offered several attempts at defining 'informal logic'[3]. An early statement rendered it as "a branch of logic whose task is to develop non-formal standards, criteria, procedures for the analysis, interpretation, evaluation, criticism and construction of argumentation" (1987). But more recently Blair has settled on "the study of the norms for reasonable non-deductive inference patterns, as well as the norms for premise acceptability" (2012, 47), a generally acceptable definition.

Over the course of its development, informal logic has moved from an interest in fallacies (particularly informal fallacies) and deep pedagogical concerns to a wider consideration of a variety of features characteristic of everyday reasoning. Criteria have been simi-

larly variable, but a case can be made for two distinctive criteria: versions of the principles of cogency that Johnson and Blair first suggested, in their case Relevance, Sufficiency and Acceptability (RSA); and the more recent development of argumentation schemes.

RSA are valuable criteria for assessing the merits of arguments. On such terms an argument is a good one if (i) its premises are singly or in combination relevant to the claims they are intended to support (that is, they increase or decrease the likelihood of those claims), (ii) provides sufficient (enough) evidence of the right kind for their conclusions, and (iii) have acceptable premises. Johnson and Blair applied these criteria to the study of fallacies, showing how each of the major traditional logical fallacies violated one or more of these three criteria.

Argumentation schemes, a particular feature of Douglas Walton's innovative work (1996) are defined by him as: "represent[ing] commonly used types of arguments that are defeasible….Schemes identify patterns of reasoning linking premises to a conclusion that can be challenged by raising critical questions" (Walton 2013, p.6). A more detailed definition is offered by David Hitchcock: "An argumentation scheme is a pattern of argument, a sequence of sentential forms with variables, with the last sentential form introduced by a conclusion indicator like 'so' or 'therefore'. The scheme becomes an argument when each variable is replaced uniformly in all its occurrences with a constant of the sort over which the variable ranges" (2010, p.157). In his book with Chris Reid and Fabrizio Macagno (2008), Walton identifies more than 60 schemes, some with sub-types. These include schemes like 'Argument from Position to Know', 'Argument from Expert Opinion', 'Argument from Analogy', and so forth. Each scheme is given identifiable premises and an accompanying set of critical questions for its analysis. The 'Argument from Position to Know', for example, is defined as:

Major Premise: Source *a* is in a position to know about things in a certain subject domain *S* containing proposition *A.*

Minor Premise: a asserts that *A* is true (false).

Conclusion: A is true (false).

The Critical Questions for the scheme are as follows:

CQ1: Is *a* in a position to know whether *A* is true (false)?

CQ2: Is *a* an honest (trustworthy, reliable) source?

CQ3: Did *a* assert that *A* is true (false)?

(Walton, et al, 2008, p.309)

The development of argumentation schemes, while it has its origins in Aristotle's *topoi*, is still a work in progress.

There is more to be said about the current state of informal logic, including the work that has been done on fallacies. But space and time limits what can be addressed under each perspective and I move on to the dialectical.

Around the time that Johnson and Blair were developing principles of informal logic in Windsor, two theorists in Amsterdam were developing the principles of pragma-dialectics. Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst (1984, 1992, 2004) held that argumentation could be understood in terms of a critical discussion and they developed normative procedures for the successful resolution of such discussions. The focus here is on rules and procedures that can and should be employed to achieve a desirable outcome in a critical discussion. The success is seen in that the participants agree to the resolution and abide by the rules for arriving at it in a reasonable fashion. Clearly, this is a normative model of argumentation that does not so much describe how people do argue but how they should do so if they want to proceed rationally. The pragma-dialectical theory is pragmatic in that it focuses on the communicative processes involved in argumentation, principally on how argumentation is conducted through speech acts (Searle, 1970); and it is dialectical in that it assumes a discussion between two parties intent on resolving a disagreement between them. A range of empirical studies has been done recently to add credence to the model.

Strategic Maneuvering in Argumentative Discourse is in many ways the most up to date and accessible account of pragma-dialectics, both in what is now called its standard form, and the extended theory. The book brings together the core of van Eemeren and Houtlosser's work, providing a full exposition of the associated

ideas and, most importantly, illustrating their integration in a theory that is still in transition. The strategic maneuvering project brings rhetoric into the dialectical fold on dialectic's own terms. Strategic maneuvering judges the relationship to be one in which rhetorical insights can be brought selectively into a dialectical framework.

Arguers do not only want to resolve differences of agreement, they want also to do so in terms that promote outcomes they prefer. Strategic maneuvering is a balancing act that bridges the gap. It "refers to the continual efforts made in all moves that are carried out in argumentative discourse to keep the balance between reasonableness and effectiveness" (2010:40). The dialectical ensures reasonableness (as seen through the procedures of the standard theory recapitulated), while the rhetorical brings the audience-oriented concerns of effectiveness into a full pragma-dialectical account.

Central to strategic maneuvering is a triad of features: topical potential, audience demand, and presentational device. These are effectively three types of choice made in maneuvering. There are, for example, many options available to an arguer in making her or his moves at various stages in a discourse, and these are captured in the idea of "topical potential." I may decide that my interests are best served by adopting analogical reasoning, and I maneuver well if I employ this in a reasonable fashion. Beyond this, I also need to consider the audience, since I want an effective outcome. Adjusting the presentation of issues to the audience at the confrontation stage, for example, involves adjusting to "audience demand." Finally, we choose "presentational devices" that we judge strategically best, drawing from whatever repertoire of such devices we have available.

The final perspective that we can describe broadly as rhetorical argumentation has achieved some of its strongest proposals in the New Rhetoric Project of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca. This Project is notable for the centrality that it gives to the role of audiences both in the development and evaluation of argumentation. All arguments are aimed at an audience, in particular at gaining (or strengthening) the adherence of an audience for the theses put forward. And to this end, the argumentation must begin in the belief set of the au-

dience (the claims to which they already adhere) and move to conclusions that they may then be persuaded or convinced to adopt and from there to *act* accordingly. A principal measure of the success of this argumentation, then, is its efficacy in achieving the right uptake in the audience. And a variety of rhetorical means is employed to achieve this, including 'choice', 'presentation' and, importantly 'presence'.

The New Rhetoric Project's concerns for value and its history in Perelman's earlier work on justice (1963; 1967) serve to distance Perelman's conception of rhetoric from any negative associations that such an idea might have with attempts to persuade at any cost and exploit audiences for the arguer's ends. Fairly presented, argumentation animates human freedom (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969:514), germinating that sphere in which reasonable choice can be exercised. And it does this because the rationality of the activity itself is predicated upon the existence of a community of minds.

Any community requires a range of commonalities of language and of interests that binds it. But entering into argumentation with others also confers value upon them, recognizes them as *worth* persuading and attaches importance to their agreement (1969:16). Establishing communion with an audience (in the rhetorical sense) involves understanding their positions, viewing things from their perspective and sharing that perspective to some degree. Moreover, this attitude elicits "some concern for the interlocutor" and requires that the arguer "be interested in his state of mind" (16).

Part Two: The Research Agenda and the Classroom:

In the preceding section, I described some of the major movements within the field of argumentation studies and the principal features associated with them. They reflect something of what constitutes the state of the art in our field at present. Considerable ground has been covered since the seminal texts of Toulmin and Perelman. Issues have been identified and emphasized; theoretical perspectives developed and pedagogy improved. Perhaps the last part is the most important. The nature of the 'logic' or 'argument' course has changed radically over the last five decades. The subject matter is closer to what people actually experience when they argue in social or

scientific contexts. And the skills involved are more reflective of those that educated citizens require. We have learned more about the nature of argument, of persuasion and conviction, and about reasoning itself. But there is still much more ground to cover. The state of the art I have described is a developing field with new research taking place on the boundaries. Let me point to some of the few challenges and possibilities that emerge from what has been accomplished so far.

Construction vs. the Evaluation of Argumentation:

One of the important outcomes of recent work, and particularly the attention to what can be gleaned from the rhetorical tradition, has been a shift in focus away from what might be called 'found' arguments and their evaluation. Instead, we are equally interested in how those arguments came about. The choices made.

Students are usually introduced to argumentation by being presented with arguments, or schemes already completed. The question of the quality of those arguments is then posed. Not discussing the choices and decisions that *produced* those arguments (the process of invention) is a missed opportunity, since argument construction is an important skill.

Students should be encouraged to take any example and consider what it tells us about the choices the arguer made (and did not make). How he conceived his audience; what the background was; and so forth. Then, take an issue and invite students to suggest strategies for developing argumentation on that issue. One of the things that is helpful in such an exercise is an understanding of argumentation schemes.

Argumentation Schemes Theory:

Several theoretical questions have occupied theorists working with argumentation schemes. How many are there, for example? There is some variety among the few taxonomies that exist. Each scheme comes with a set of critical questions for its evaluation.

Most of the schemes in the literature appear frequently in everyday argumentation. The reason for this seems to be their prima facie plausibility (Blair, 2012: 129). The critical questions for each scheme are thus important anchors that provide some common standard against which each argument can be judged. But why these questions and not others? Can the critical questions be improved? Are they culturally bound, or

do they work across cultures? This is very much ongoing work. Students could take individual schemes, or sets of related schemes, or entire taxonomies, and do a lot of interesting work with them/ For example, which particular issues favour certain kinds of schemes?

Audience Studies:

Work in argumentation theory must assume a lot about the nature of audiences and how arguers understand them. But without more investigation, coherent responses to certain audience-related issues continue to elude us. Placing the audience in the centre of a theory of argumentation, while doing much to correct previous imbalances, serves to draw attention to a range of difficult questions.

One important change that this focus brings to light is how issues of identity have come to the fore. This is not to overlook central questions that still accompany the topic of persuasion, or how audience considerations should influence the evaluation of arguments. But in many respects, questions of persuasion and evaluation can be readjusted to focus on concerns with identity.

There are several ways in which questions of identity enter the interests of argumentation. One primary interest is in audience identity or make-up.[4] We may begin with the question of who is the audience of any particular argumentative discourse and proceed to the question of how an arguer can accommodate a composite audience comprised of different groups and individuals. Consider, for example, how these things are complicated when we look at historical arguments.

Concerns with audience identity do not end here. Some intended audiences are comprised of such diverse elements that it is difficult to be sure who is being addressed and on what terms. Composite audiences invariably divide along group lines, and different groups subscribe to different perspectives that affect their beliefs and alter how they would react to aspects of a discourse. Advocating that an arguer know her audience in terms of the beliefs and attitudes involved brings this problem to the fore. Even when such diverse elements are identified, the question remains how such diversity can be accommodated in argumentation.

A lot of research has been done on the other two principal components of the argumentative situation: the argument and the arguer. Now there is an opportunity for similar work looking at audience questions.

Visual and Narrative Argumentation:

Visual argumentation is an interesting topic in that it seems to have gone from highly controversial to generally accepted in just a few years. Recent international conferences on argumentation have seen more and more sessions on visual and multi-modal argumentation. A decade ago, there was a fraction of the number of papers on this topic.

Several things are at issue here: Can an image (a photograph, cartoon, painting) be an argument, and if so what conditions must it meet? Or, do we have a stronger case for hybrid arguments, where the visual contributes something to what is also written? If so, what is the added value of the visual? Most controversially, are propositional arguments *the* paradigm, such that anything that is an argument must be able to be reduced or set out in propositional form? Or is the propositional just one way among others of expressing arguments, and not *the* authoritative way? This is still an area in which research continues, although theorists seem satisfied with the answers to at least some of these questions.

Unlike work on visual argumentation that has been underway for a while now, far less attention has been given to narrative argumentation. But it is topic that is affected by some of the same issues as the visual and I would expect to see more work in this area over the coming years. Consider the following remark:

I have learned that arguments, no matter how watertight, often fall on deaf ears. I am myself the author of arguments that I consider rigorous and unanswerable but that are often not so much rebutted or even dismissed as simply ignored...I want to get thinkers in other disciplines to take evolutionary thinking seriously, to show them how they have been underestimating it, and to show them why they have been listening to the wrong sirens. For this, I have to use more artful methods. I have to tell a story. You don't want to be swayed by a story? Well, I *know* you won't be swayed by a formal argument; you won't even *listen* to a formal argument for my conclusion, so I start where I have to start.

--Daniel Dennett (1995), *Darwin's Dangerous Idea.*

Aristotle reminds us that the human being is not only a rational animal, but also a story-telling animal. And those stories (represented through the dramas of the *Poetics*) must have a certain structure and an internal logic, following by means of what is necessary or probable. Narratives that violate such principles, that are improbable or otherwise "irrational;" will not have the appropriate effect on an audience.

Some argumentation theorists erect barriers to prevent the treatment of narratives as arguments or at least to police the situation with strict conditions that would have to be met before the narrative qualifies. Essentially, these conditions reduce to demands that narratives fit the structure of arguments in order to qualify. That is, they must have a claim and supporting premises. This fits the definition provided by Tone Kvernbekk, for example, in her paper "Narratives as Informal Arguments" (2003) and what Trudy Govier and Lowell Ayers (2012) describe as the "core" of an argument. Of course, in identifying a core, they also suggest that there are non-core elements, and this they provide in a footnote: emotional indicators, counter-considerations, and also jokes or illustrative anecdotes (2102, 166n.9). In fact, a fuller exploration of that footnote, were we to conduct it, might well find a case for the narrative in the argument. But as long as the core criterion dominates in accounts such as those of Kvernbekk and Govier & Ayers, then the analyst can demand of the text, 'what are the premises?', and in the absence of a suitable response, reject the candidate. In a sense, the problem is similar to the treatment of images as arguments. What much of this suggests to me is that whether narratives can work as arguments will depend very much on how we construe 'argument'.

In the Classroom:

I have focused more on the research agenda that the current state of the art encourages than on the actual pedagogical opportunities that argumentation theory provides. But some of these opportunities can be seen in what I have canvassed above.

If we had more time, we could think about how argumentation contributes to the development of critical but reasonable and open

minds. Classroom practices encourage a review of all sides of an issue and the reasons people have for holding the different positions they do. We do not aim for a homogeneous society where everyone thinks the same. History has taught us that this is an unrealistic goal, if it ever was one seriously held. And the prospect of living in such a society, without the vibrancy of disagreements that encourage debate and discussion is unattractive to most of us. But we can aim for a society in which people are open to the views of others, and open to understanding those views, even if we do not hold them ourselves, Argumentation theory is the perfect tool to encourage the citizens of such a society.

To this end, argumentation theory helps students see values come alive in debates. It is one thing to discuss different values and the reasons for hold them. But seeing them being held and the impact that those values have on different lives is a different matter altogether, and an important learning experience.

Finally, argumentation theory puts the focus on developing one's own perspective on the basis of clear, logically-formed reasons. Students come to class with many of their central views already formed. And they can leave the course with those same views intact. But what they can learn in the interim is how to ground those views in reasonable argumentation such that they can be justified (to themselves, and to others). Now, they hold the same views with deeper understanding and a stronger, well-reasoned attachment.

Conclusion: An Embarrassment of Riches:

I have scratched the surface here. The rich debts we have to Toulmin, Perelman, and others is still being recognized and gradually repaid. The field has delved deeper into areas they identified, like legal argumentation, and colonized areas they could not have imagined, like artificial intelligence. For the young researcher entering the field there really is an embarrassment of riches. In very few fields today is there so much choice for new researchers looking to make their mark. And for the pedagogue there are rich resources for enlivening and focusing the curriculum. We should all be a little envious of today's students; there is such an interesting future beckoning to them.

Endnote

1) In fairness, what van Eemeren questions is why "a vision from ancient times" should exercise such influence on the appropriate relationship between rhetoric and dialectic in contemporary argumentation theory (2010:82).

2) And maybe not even the first significant figure, as I have tried to show in my own work (Tindale, 2010).

3) The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry, written by Leo Groarke, is an excellent source of information on informal logic and its relationship to argumentation theory: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-informal/

4) We also should note that argumentation, or being involved in argumentation, is fundamental to the understanding and development of personal identities. That is, arguers and audience members are persons, and just as being persons impacts the kinds of arguers and audiences they may be, so, more controversially, being arguers and audience members impacts the kinds of persons that are involved and has important bearing on how we should understand 'personal identity'.

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