Teaching Argument as Persuasion Dialogue Through Point of View and the Commitment Store

Robert J. Graham

Over the last few years I have been the instructor of an elective course for undergraduate teacher candidates called "The Teacher and the Writing Process." The course introduces preservice teachers of English language arts and social studies to recent theories of and perspectives on writing as a process and uses a workshop approach to the teaching of writing derived mainly from the work of Nancie Atwell, Lucy Calkins, and Donald Murray. Theoretically, the course refreshes their understanding of common forms of writing they will be required to teach in their classrooms, for example, poetry, the short story, film and book reviews, and the persuasive essay. In addition, a workshop approach assists students in uncovering unexplored assumptions about the act of writing and puts them closer in touch with their own emerging identities as teachers of writing.

In practice, however, I have often considered these goals overextended given the relative brevity of the course (nine weeks) with its twice-weekly meeting times. Nevertheless, as I have explored elsewhere (Graham, 2000), and as Barbara Walvoord has written, taking time to uncover assumptions about the interplay between writing, teaching, and identity is important work because, "One needs somehow to construct oneself as a teacher of writing, much as students need to construct themselves as writers" (ix). I, too, have discovered that a significant part of my students' coming to see themselves as teachers of writing is derived from a developing sense of self-confidence in their own

abilities as writers. In addition, the level of comfort they feel in talking about various forms of writing appears directly proportional to their understanding of the common features and descriptive vocabularies of particular discursive forms. As I will show, nowhere in my students' experiences of the workshop do their confidence, attitudes, and beliefs intersect so tellingly with the characteristics of a discursive form than during the two-week portion of the course given over to the teaching of argument.

In this article I first highlight a new emphasis in the approach I now take to the teaching of argument by describing Douglas Walton's conception of argument as a form of persuasion dialogue. Second, I show how the crucial distinction Walton makes between the related concepts of point of view and the commitment store is important for writing instructors in their own thinking about and teaching of argument. I ground this claim in a brief analysis of position papers my students wrote on a controversial topic and in a description of a prewriting exercise intended to emphasize the necessity of rebuttal in a view of argument as a dialogical act. And finally, I identify a number of residual issues that resurface with some regularity whenever students' beliefs encounter argumentation as one of the commonly-taught discursive forms in writing classrooms.

Argument as Persuasion Dialogue

In *The New Dialectic: Conversational Contexts of Argument*, as well as in a number of other publications designed "to give a new theoretical basis for logic which can be used to evaluate arguments that arise in everyday conversational exchanges" (Walton 5), Douglas Walton defines dialogue as "a conventionalized, purposive joint activity between two parties where the parties act as speech partners" (29). By defining a dialogue in this way, Walton wants to emphasize not only its game-like properties, where depending on the purpose of the dialogue both parties "can respond with an appropriate countermove or reply" (29), but also to have us reconsider argument itself "as a type of move in a dialogue" (30). Walton

enumerates six main types of dialogue: persuasion, information-seeking, negotiation, inquiry, eristic (quarrel), and deliberation (31) in order to foreground the overall purpose of the dialogue and to evaluate whether the dialogue has successfully addressed that purpose. Thus, for Walton an argument as a form of persuasion dialogue "is relevant to the extent that it is an appropriate type of move at that stage of the dialogue" (30).

In addition, in his book *Informal Logic: A Handbook for Critical Argumentation*, Walton maintains that before an argument can be considered strong or weak, unconvincing or compelling, each party involved in the exchange "has an obligation to work toward fulfilling his (sic) own goal in the dialogue and also an obligation to co-operate with the other participant's fulfilment of his goal" (3). This process allows an individual to "extract commitments" (6) from the other so that these can then be used as premises in his own argument. Argument as an appropriate move in a persuasion dialogue is therefore based on both the co-operation and concessions of the other party.

It is this view of argument as a form of persuasion dialogue that I have recently been attempting to promote with my students. I elected to move more self-consciously in this direction to supplement my teaching of Stephen Toulmin's model of argumentation since I discovered that in course papers many students didn't move beyond the basic elements of data, claim, and warrant to include the dialogical element Toulmin makes provision for with the idea of rebuttal. By omitting this critical feature, my students were not, as Dick Leith and George Myerson put it, "engag[ing] with other views and voices, either explicitly (dialogue) or implicitly, anticipating how others may react to what one says" (81).

As I now point out to my students, several important outcomes of persuasion dialogue involve the reciprocal obligations to co-operate and to concede. First, Walton's dialogical model recasts the context of the argument in an altogether different light. For example, although Walton gives due weight to the quarrel (eristic) as a form of dialogue where "reasoning procedures are

always subservient to winning out over the other party" (*New Dialectic* 33), the quarrel is only one response (however legitimate) to a context of argument. At the same time as the quarrel does capture much of the passionate cut-and-thrust of face-to face argument, Walton clearly reminds us that it is not the purpose of every dialogue to produce winners or losers.

Second, argument conceived of as persuasion dialogue can support a concern for what philosopher Richard Paul has called "strong sense critical thinkers" (3), that is, for individuals disposed to question commitments "in which they have a personal, egocentric investment" (3). A persuasion dialogue can reveal to them the bases for their convictions on certain issues, as well as furnish the conditions under which these convictions may be scrutinized more dispassionately. Although I will say more about this aspect of argumentation in the next section, I will simply note here that Walton's concern for argument as persuasion dialogue obliges students to assume the burden of proof, that is, to supply evidence for propositions about the world that they are committed to. When students take responsibility for the burden of proof, they are more likely to be cast in the role of Paul's strong-sense critical thinker, an individual whose awareness of opposed points of view constitutes an integral part of her consciousness of argument as primarily a form of dialogue.

Thus, in reviewing my approach to the teaching of argument I felt I had to place much more emphasis on addressing the crucial concepts of commitments and rebuttals. Under Walton's influence I came to appreciate that argument as persuasion dialogue "is a generic type of dialogue defined by the concept of commitment and by the use of commitment and, in particular, the other party's commitment to prove one's own conclusions in argumentation" (*New Dialectic* 31). Similarly, I wanted to hold fast to a rhetorical notion of argument to reinforce that arguing involves more than putting forward a point of view; rather, as Leith and Myerson state, one speaks and writes "*in the awareness of a different or opposing view*" (85) (emphasis in original).

Although I had been aware of these necessary conditions in the effective construction of arguments, my dissatisfaction in trying to provide future teachers with enhanced practical skills contributed to my search for a more fine-grained appreciation for the dialogical properties of argument, to guide my subsequent planning and instruction. Thus while moving towards dealing more systematically in my teaching with commitments and rebuttals, I was both consoled and encouraged to discover these words in George Baker and Henry Huntingdon's *The Principles of Argumentation* published in 1895:

> Refutation can hardly be mastered early in study of argumentation, for its effectiveness depends on a thorough understanding of the principles of analysis and evidence.... Students usually wholly neglect it at first, contenting themselves with a statement of their own ideas more or less adequately supported with evidence (168-169).

Consequently, I decided that to address refutation or rebuttal as a developmental late-comer, I needed to know my students' range of personal commitments about a representative "hot button" issue. For Walton, these kinds of commitments can "function as a way of attributing a particular bias to the speaker's argument on that issue" (One-Sided 99); however, as Walton notes, it is quite another thing "to resist modifying, revising, or developing that point of view when good arguments criticizing it are encountered in a dialogue" (99).

With these cautionary remarks in mind, a week before I began our formal classes in argumentation, I invited my students (13 female, 3 male) to respond in writing to two prompts. The first prompt asked them to choose one of three topics: abortion, capital punishment or gun control, and to state what their own position was on this issue, and more importantly, to provide some indication of why they had come to hold that position. The second prompt was expressed in the form of two questions, repeated in a slightly different form, namely, "What would it take for you to

change your mind on this issue?" Put another way: "Of what would you need to be persuaded or convinced before you would change your mind?" Surprisingly, fifteen of the sixteen students wrote on the topic of abortion. The following section which considers their points of view around this issue shows how their responses influenced a subsequent prewriting strategy designed to call attention to the existence of rebuttals.

Point of View and the Commitment Store

As indicated above, part of my intent in gathering short position papers from my students on a controversial issue was to discover their particular points of view and hence to access what Walton calls their "commitment store" (*New Dialectic* 40) on that issue as a guide for further instructional planning. Thus, since one of my goals as a teacher of writing was to challenge my students' image of themselves as strong-sense critical thinkers and writers, I realized that by discovering the strength of their commitments on an issue I might find ways to draw to their attention the strength of other voices and views, views that might dramatize and reinforce the notion of argument as essentially a dialogical act.

I turn now to a selection of my students' writing on the topic of abortion, not simply to show the range and diversity of views (that is a given), but more importantly to derive some additional understanding and insight from inspecting their spontaneous comments on what it would take to change their minds on that particular topic. Recall that most of my students are preservice teachers of language arts or social studies, individuals who will be called upon to teach argumentation and persuasive writing as a regular part of their teaching assignment. Clearly, if they are to do this well they must at least be challenged to confront their own often pre-critical assumptions and positions as part of the broader Socratic imperative to 'know thyself.' I focus on the views of the three male and three female class members whose views, while not wholly representative of the others, are sufficiently compelling and provocative to warrant attention.

For Scott, the principle behind the abortion issue is that "not only women but everyone should be able to have the choice of what they want to do with their body, as long as it isn't harmful to others." In order for him to be persuaded otherwise, Scott would need to be convinced that "at 2-3 months after conception the fetus is able to know what is going on inside the womb.... This would seem very difficult to prove." Similarly, Jason believes " in a woman's right to choose what to do with her body." Although a self-confessed Catholic, Jason opposes the Church's stand on the issue because for him it contravenes Jesus' teaching—"Judge not lest ye be judged" (sic). In order for Jason to change his views he would need to be convinced "that imposing one's morality on others was in God's plan, and that mankind (sic) wasn't created with the ability to make choices." Finally, for Tony, "abortion is the woman's decision to make and not the responsibility of legislators." For him, if pro-lifers could "convincingly demonstrate that abortion harms society, then I would relent." In the final instance, abortion is for Tony "a practical problem, not a moral issue." Since he is uneasy with forcing "my morality down someone's throat," the issue then becomes one of "finding the best practical solution for society as a whole."

From among the female students, although Sandra wonders why she hasn't "any space in my intellect to accommodate" the notion that "abortion is killing," the plain fact is that she does not. For Sandra, "Nothing could change my mind as I've struggled with this issue religiously all my life;" she has "seen the circumstances that have resulted from unwanted pregnancies." At one time in her life, Lily "had a strong belief that abortion was wrong." However, when she became "a mother and a feminist," she chose to have a tubal ligation and was "insulted" when her husband "had to sign a permission form for this to be done." Consequently, she does "not think that anyone could change my pro-choice attitude" because she believes that "we should not be regulated by governments or rules where our bodies and lives will or could change forever." Finally, when Tanya was younger, like Lily, she too "argued vehemently against abortion" feeling that "abortion

was murder." However, as she has "grown, matured, and had my own children, my black-and-white attitude has changed" partly because she formed a close friendship with "a very spiritual, very religious" woman who had chosen to have an abortion. Today, she is "not sure that there is anything that would change my mind on the issue." She does not "like what to be told to do or think" and instead prefers "facts, empirical evidence, real-life stories etc" over "shock literature and propaganda" if someone were to present a different set of beliefs.

It is clear from these responses that each individual had constructed some well-developed and passionately held point of view on this topic and that many of them were hard pressed to imagine circumstances or evidence that would substantively alter their positions. In this instance, their responses certainly fulfilled Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst's criteria for point of view since they were made up of "an *expressed opinion* that is a proposition and an attitude toward that proposition" (*Speech Acts* 79) (emphasis added). By stating their points of view so positively (one might even say uncompromisingly), individuals were making visible some of the contents of their own commitment store.

The notion of the commitment store references an idea crucial for participants in a persuasion dialogue, as well as crucial for teachers of writing to consider, because it signals the existence of "a kind of log or repository that would keep track of all their commitments as the dialogue proceeds" (*One-Sided* 66). At different times in the dialogue, propositions are added or deleted so that in an ideal speech situation each participant knows what is in his or her commitment store as well as in the commitment stores of the other participants. But one can imagine situations that are less than ideal: in a general discussion of abortion in our class, it may have proved difficult to broker a critical dialogue that provided for additions and deletions to the commitment store as Walton envisages (given the apparent reluctance of many students to entertain a different point of view). So how was I to deal with this potentially common circumstance strategically in order to initiate a classroom situation where students are, temporarily at

least, placed in a situation where their commitments do not necessarily represent their points of view?

Again, Walton was useful here, in that he realizes that "if a proposition is part of one's point of view...then one is committed to that proposition. But the converse is not necessarily true. One can be committed to a proposition in a dialogue, even if that proposition is not part of one's point of view in the dialogue" (*One-Sided* 67). To find some way of capitalizing on the tension between point of view and commitment, I constructed the following classroom strategy.

A Prewriting Strategy for Accessing a Commitment Store

To access in a more formal and public way my students' commitment store, albeit one that did not necessarily represent their own point of view on an issue, I selected two essays from *Time* magazine. Since both well-written essays dealt at length with several counter-arguments, I copied the major thesis or proposition of each essay onto separate sheets of red and green paper and then copied one rebuttal statement from each essay onto sheets of blue and yellow paper. I randomly created eight student pairs, giving two pairs the proposition written on the red paper and two pairs the rebuttal on the blue paper. I repeated the process with the other students thereby creating two green pairs and two yellow pairs. I then sent each red, blue, green and yellow pair to different areas of the classroom, far from the pair with the same colored paper.

The task for each pair was to read the statement on their paper and for fifteen minutes assume that this statement was a true representation of their own beliefs and points of view on that issue. They were to brainstorm with their partners and write down as many reasons they could think of in support of the statement. They were to stay in role as best they could and to remain focused on generating solid support for the proposition they had been assigned.

After fifteen minutes, each pair linked up with the other pair who had the same colored paper to make a small group of four. One person from each pair would read aloud their reasons in support of the proposition. Each group of four then compiled a composite list of warrants for their position by weeding out weaker evidence and creating as strong a list of reasons as they could. The original pairs now linked up with a pair who had been working on an alternative aspect of the topic on different colored paper. In this way four groups of four were formed: two groups of red and blue and two groups of green and yellow.

By the time these groups came together, the classroom was buzzing with anticipation. Subsequently a spokesperson from each pair in turn slowly read aloud their list of reasons. While the person was reading, the other pair would make notes. After this process, a free-flowing discussion of the topic ensued with an accompanying increase in the decibel level! In a final move in this strategy each group received a photocopy of the original essay from which I had taken the major propositions and rebuttal statements. The students then read the essays in the light of their own discussions and engaged in a concluding round of conversation.

Shortly thereafter, I conducted a debriefing session on the strategy itself, on its structure and purpose, to determine to what extent it accomplished its goals. Naturally enough, the students found most difficult getting in role and staying in role, particularly when many of them immediately disagreed with the statement they had been given. As Melissa later wrote as part of her self-evaluation in the course, "I just thought 'I can't do this!' How could I be placed in a situation where I have to make up reasons for a position I don't believe in?? I'm sure glad Kim settled me down and it surprised me that we managed to come up with so many great ideas." More positively, many students noted that although it was a challenge to stay in role, they found themselves expressing opinions that they didn't even realize they agreed with until they were put in the position of having to take the statement they had been given seriously. Jason tried to give a sense of this

when he wrote, "What I found out about myself from the argument exercise was that I'm really not so liberal as I thought I was! Who'd have thought that I really do believe in some form of censorship, especially now that I've got a little girl of my own?"

Another positive feature of this strategy was that, although some students questioned the artificiality and length of time of the exercise, they understood more clearly how important it was to deal with the toughest objections to a position that they could devise. When the process was completed, and when they reviewed how much evidence had been generated as a result, taking a position and dealing with potential rebuttals seemed less daunting in their own writing. Melissa wrote: "I know I need to keep working on my essay writing skills, but between the Toulmin stuff (sic) and the big exercise with the colored paper, I'm less scared of this kind of writing than I used to be."

Conclusion

One conclusion that could be drawn from my students' writing on the abortion topic is that once in place an individual's point of view on an issue will become, de facto, part of his or her permanent commitment store, sometimes even in the face of powerful counter-arguments. Sandra, Lily and Tanya all took the position that nothing would make them change their minds on the issue and that these commitments were out in the open for all to see. During a persuasion dialogue envisaged by Walton, this confident airing of commitments is called a person's "light-side commitments" (*One-Sided* 34), referencing here their public aspect and the fact that what often begins in the expressed attitude of a point of view can indeed become a feature of an individual's commitment store. A goal of my prewriting strategy was to increase the probability that during the process my students might begin to articulate, or be put in touch with, what Walton calls their "dark-side commitments" (34), that is, commitments that "can be inferred only indirectly from a person's argumentation, or from the text of discourse that we have" (34). These dark-side commitments "represent the underlying position of the

participant," a position to whose existence and force individuals for various reasons remain oblivious. Although one would want to halt this side of calling a strategy for accessing these dark-side commitments "therapeutic," for many of my students part of the strategy's success did derive from making their dark-side commitments visible and from being able to articulate them in a safe and supportive environment. In addition, the notion that students can write best about what they have first talked about and that they can write effectively "only to people with whom they have been and continue to be in conversation" (Chaffee 4), has been reiterated by any number of commentators on the teaching of writing, at least since the early work of James Britton and his colleagues. Consequently, by offering my students an opportunity to converse with each other at every step in a process that included the built-in risks associated with role-playing, I was relying on the social and affective aspects of the writing workshop to strengthen my students' engagement in the task.

However, even though the students were put in touch with a rich source of rebuttals about a particular topic, and some, like Jason, did discover dark-side commitments of which he was unaware, it is unlikely that many changed their minds significantly on the issues in the sense that schema theorists of reading comprehension would call restructuring. Rather, I hoped that accessing both light-side and dark-side commitments in this manner might affect the students' commitment store sufficiently so that they could choose from the repository of rebuttal-candidates those that seemed potentially most damaging to the progress of argumentative moves in their own writing.

Seeing argument as a form of persuasion dialogue challenges teachers of writing to create alternative strategies and classroom conditions whereby our students' dark-side commitments may be brought more into the light. Walton calls this its "maieutic function" (*One-Sided* 34), a concept derived from the Greek word *maieutikos* meaning "'skill in midwifery'" (34), a skill such as Socrates displayed by bringing "new ideas to birth through verbal argumentation with another party" (34). Walton calls this

increased understanding of one's commitments "a very valuable gain" (34), an advance that "consists in a negative clearing away of dogmatic preconceptions, biases, and fallacies that can remove obstacles to the advancement of knowledge" (34).

As teachers of writing we may not always remain as sanguine as Walton in assuming that accessing our students' commitment store will necessarily clear away their "dogmatic preconceptions"; but we must remain convinced that a truly dialogical view of argumentation requires no less of us and that entailed in this recognition is the responsibility to devise ways to keep the dialogue going.

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