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COMMENTARY

Learning Argument Practices Through Online Role-Play: Toward a Rhetoric of Significance and Transformation

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One important literacy practice is the ability to formulate effective arguments to convince others of the validity of one's position. In this commentary, we discuss the literacy practices involved in formulating arguments as well as the challenges involved in helping students acquire these practices. In contrast to more traditional approaches to teaching argument, we propose that students can learn these practices through participation in online role-play activities. We also argue that students will be more motivated to engage in online role-play if they are debating an issue or problem that affects their everyday lives and that will lead to change, an approach driven by what we describe as a rhetoric of significance and transformation. We believe that it is important that students learn how to engage in these collaborative arguments with others to address and solve problems in their everyday lives. In this commentary, we propose some activities designed to foster use of collaborative arguments in the classroom through the use of online role-play.

Learning to Engage in Written Arguments

Students typically engage in arguments in schools through writing persuasive essays in which they voice opinions on an issue, but they generally provide little support for those opinions (Felton & Herko, 2004). These formalized approaches to teaching arguments are often divorced from students' uses of arguing in everyday conversations in which they are more likely to employ counter-claims, rebuttals, and qualifications than in formal persuasive essays (Felton & Herko, 2004).

Their persuasive essay tasks also occur in a rhetorical vacuum. One possible explanation for students' poor performance on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) persuasive writing assessments (Greenwald, Persky, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999) has to do with the authenticity of test-taking rhetorical context in which students are writing for no authentic purpose and audience, a limitation that the new NAEP composition assessments are addressing. When students have a specific purpose and audience for their

written arguments, they are more likely to consider counter-arguments and rebuttals (Midgette, Haria, & MacArthur, 2008). Moreover, in writing persuasive essays, students may have little ownership of or conviction about the position they are adopting, resulting in writing as no more than an exercise in "knowledge telling" (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1984).

Instruction in argument is further limited by a focus on adopting a competitive, confrontational stance, particularly in oral debates in which the goal is to win over audiences and defeat opponents. This competitive approach differs from a more collaborative perspective in which people collectively posit, test out, and revise alternative positions within a larger context of engaging in community rhetorical action leading to change (Flower, 2008).

Students' notions of argument are also shaped by their experience with portrayals of argument in the media designed to influence audience beliefs. Unfortunately, students often find that the media appeals to the beliefs of certain niche audiences who gravitate to those outlets reporting news consistent with their beliefs.

While American audiences largely acquired their news from the same outlets up until the 1970s—CBS, NBC, ABC, the AP, and major newspapers—since the 1980s, the news has increasingly been channeled and filtered by outlets such as Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, the *Wall Street Journal* or MSNBC, CNN, or the *Huffington Post*, targeted to certain niche audiences who then adopt the beliefs espoused by these outlets (Manjoo, 2008).

Audiences therefore construct their beliefs about information on issues according to their identification with their particular values groups—"conservative Republicans," "environmentalists," "libertarians," "liberal Democrats," and the like—associated with and constructed by specific media outlets. An analysis of Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, and the *Wall Street Journal* characterized these outlets as "echo chambers" in that these outlets restrict access to alternative, competing news sources and negatively portray political opponents (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008).

When audiences acquire information through these filtered echo chambers, they adopt opposing beliefs about the same empirical information. They then assess policy recommendations according to their selective media outlet's filtered presentation of that filtered information on issues of the economy, taxes, global warming, military spending, health care, education, and so on. Given these competing beliefs on these issues, the public adopts polarized, competitive stances on these issues, undermining any consensus on how to address those issues through a rhetoric of significance and transformation. And, as modeled in the media, our students continue to perceive argument as a competitive process.

Collaborative Versus Competitive Arguments

As an alternative to these competitive arguments in schools or the media, engaging in collaborative arguments involves exchanging ideas and negotiating differences for the larger purpose of attempting to mutually solve problems (Andriessen, Baker, & Suthers, 2003; Clark & Sampson, 2008). In a collaborative approach, students also respect their adversaries as potential sources of useful ideas and solutions (Kroll, 2008).

In competitive arguments, students are encouraged to adopt assertive, definitive stances without equivocation. In collaborative arguments, students are encouraged to adopt a more tentative, exploratory stance associated with adopting "passing theories"—hunches, opinions, or hypotheses that need further testing (Davidson, 1984). In adopting these passing theories, students may then be more open to entertaining and inviting alternative positions or counter-arguments in discussion with their peers.

The use of collaborative argument is portrayed in the television show, *House* (Shore, 2004). In this show, patients come into a hospital with issues for which there is no simple diagnosis—everyone is stumped as to what's wrong with the patient. Dr. House and a team of his interns then spend the rest of the program working through and testing out alternative diagnoses to come up with a possible cure. In doing so, they are engaged in collaborative argument. Different members of the team advance different diagnoses only to be refuted by Dr. House or other members of the team. Most of these diagnoses prove to be wrong, until, at the end, a valid diagnosis emerges and the patient is

cured or, as is often the case, the diagnosis is that the patient cannot be cured.

In voicing their different possible diagnoses, Dr. House and the interns are doing more than trying to win debate points for the sake of impressing each other. Because they all want to derive a valid diagnosis, they carefully attend to each other's evidence for certain diagnoses. They also depend on each other's expertise to collaboratively solve their problems. Rather than stubbornly standing their ground, they are open to changing their minds and embracing alternative beliefs and explanations.

Toward a Rhetoric of Significance and Transformation

In their persuasive writing or debates, students often argue about issues that have little direct bearing to their everyday lives, for example, the abolition of the Electoral College. Students are more likely to engage in collaborative arguments if they perceive an issue or problem being addressed as significant to their lives—as being a big deal for them. For students, the fact that they can't participate in their favorite sport because their school team has been eliminated due to budget cuts is a big deal.

In this sense, adopting a *rhetoric of significance* involves determining what issues or problems are a big deal for students and thus motivate them to want to formulate reasons and gather evidence. In doing so, students may cite personal, ethical, or moral reasons for why the status quo isn't working and needs to be addressed—why, for example, they should have the opportunity to participate on a sports team.

Students are more likely to perceive their writing as significant when they know that their arguments may lead to change or transformation in the status quo—that voicing their opinions may actually influence people's beliefs, resulting in changes in the status quo. Students are often not invested in writing about an issue because they assume that they have no agency to affect change, so, why bother. If they sense that voicing their opinions may lead to change, they may then be motivated to formulate effective arguments for their positions, as well as propose possible solutions.

Students are particularly motivated to argue for change when they identify instances of status-quo policies or practices not serving their needs. For example, Flower (2008) describes a group of students in a community literacy program who were angry about the attempts of Pittsburgh police to adopt a curfew on young people in their neighborhood. The teens then took "literate action" through use of writing pamphlets to initiate a community conversation about the curfew. The community conversation was built around multiple perspectives and a problem-solving dialogue that "embraces difference, conflict, and contradiction" (Flower, 2008, p. 173). Engaging this diverse dialogue with members of the community and law enforcement personnel served to transform beliefs about the efficacy of a curfew in limiting crime.

Adopting this *rhetoric of transformation* requires more than simply documenting the need for change and demanding that change occur. Students also need to address people's *beliefs* about an issue or problem to convince them of the limitations of the status quo and the need for change. In participation in collaborative arguments, as does Dr. House and his interns, students judge the validity of competing beliefs as the basis for formulating reasons for problems in the status quo, the need for change, and possible solutions.

While emotional appeals can certainly influence people's beliefs, students also need to know how to use factual evidence and counter-arguments to influence beliefs. The community literacy students knew that they needed to address the belief held by both neighborhood residents and law enforcement that adopting a curfew would prevent crime, beliefs reflecting larger discourses and cultural models about urban adolescents and crime. To do so, students needed to provide counter-evidence to refute these beliefs—evidence that curfews don't necessary defer crime—as well as voice alternative beliefs about how curfews may actually provoke crime.

Developing Agency to Enact Transformation

One challenge in enacting a rhetoric of significance and transformation is that students assume that they lack the agency—the power or status to identify issues as significant to their lives leading to the need to enact change. In her discussion of agency, Flower (2008) argued that students need to question assumptions about who has power to make change. She

recasted agency not in terms of goal-driven assertion of power and resistance, but rather as the ability to cope with and deliberate about conflicts leading to change through collaboration with others. Drawing on Taylor (1985), Flower (2008) posited that agency involves thoughtful, engaged, dialogic reflection on what is worthy or significant:

> The marker of agency is not action, control, or even choice. Rather, it is the indication of engagement in this deliberative, interpretative, constructive encounter with a "largely inarticulate sense of what is of decisive importance" [Taylor, 1985, p. 38]. (p. 204)

This collaboration involves dialogic interaction that values the agency of others, particularly marginalized others who are assumed to lack agency according to elite standards. Students acquire this dialogic agency through collectively responding to others' acts and voices, in terms of their willingness to "go public, to engage in a dialogue that listens, speaks, and expects a response to which they are prepared to respond" (Flower, 2008, p. 205).

In contrast to argument as competition, students acquire this agency through adopting a rhetoric of significance and transformation—collaboratively identifying what they perceive as worthy or significant problems with the status quo and then working together to change that status quo through argument and action.

Using Online Role-Play to Engage Students in Collaborative Argument

Students learn to engage in collaborative arguments through participation in online forums and debates (Andriessen, Baker, & Suthers, 2003; Erduran & Jiménez-Aleixandre, 2007). In an online debate, students adopt roles and positions related to a certain issue and then conduct a debate on a blog or online discussion tool over an extended time period. These debates involve students voicing their role's positions and responding to other roles' positions. Students also build alliances with like-minded roles to collaboratively frame policy recommendations for addressing problems in status-quo policies or practices.

These debates are resolved by a governing body, school board, voters, and others, making a decision on proposed actions. Students in Richard's (first author) classes have conducted debates on Moodle—an online course discussion platform—on issues such as teacher pay-for-performance or creation of single-sex classrooms.. Candance (second author) has also employed online role-plays through use of a course blog in her college composition courses in which students debated issues such as lowering the drinking age and nuclear power in North Korea (Doerr, 2007).

Students are certainly familiar with engaging in online roles through their experiences with playing video games or participating in virtual worlds on sites such as SimCity, Second Life, and Whyville. From these experiences, they acquire the literacy practices of collective intelligence, problem-solving, strategic thinking, interpreting contexts, imaginative play, etc. (Gee, 2004; Shaffer, 2006). Educators can exploit this experience by creating various online activities involving persuasive writing, activities listed in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Online Sites Involving Persuasive Writing

- Ink, developed at Michigan State University (http://writing.msu.edu/ink/research.htm) to teach composition, including persuasive writing involved in addressing issues.
- Letters to the Next President (https://www.letters2president.org/sessions/new) in which students wrote letters to candidates in the 2008 election on Google Docs that were then posted to a website.
- Mad City Mystery, a game designed to teach arguments based on scientific investigation (Squire & Mingfong, 2007).
- The Persuasive Games site (www.persuasivegames.com), Democracy, (positech.co.uk/democracy/faq.html), A Force More Powerful (www.afmpgame.com), Peacemaker (www.peacemakergame.com) involves use of persuasive writing in games to address conflicts or political issues.
- LittleBigPlanet (www.littlebigplanet.com), Fallout 3 (http://fallout.bethsoft.com/index.html), and Global Warming Interactive, (www.globalwarminginteractive.com/game.htm) deal with environmental issues (Bryant, 2008).
- The Courts project that involves students in arguing legal positions in virtual courts (Gee, 2008).
- Debatepedia (http://wiki.idebate.org), a wikipedia organized around pro–con arguments.
- Debategraph (http://debatemapper.com) uses wikis used to display arguments on various current issues.
- Opposing Views (www.opposingviews.com) provides experts' opinions on topics such as the Electoral College, legalizing marijuana, prayer in schools, legalize gambling, the death penalty, and other issues.

Advantages of Online Role-Play

Based on our experiences in using and observing students engaged in these role-play activities, we have found that online role-plays have a number of advantages for teaching collaborative argument over writing traditional persuasive essays or engaging in oral debates, advantages afforded by the interactivity, hyperlinking, and multimodality involved in online debates (Beach, Anson, Breuch, & Swiss, 2008; Beach & Doerr-Stevens, in press).

Interactivity: Interaction With Single or Multiple Virtual Audiences. When they participate in an online debate, students can visually identify their different audiences based on their pictures or role descriptions so that they can continually view and respond to any of their peers' posts. While students address their posts for only certain audiences, the entire class has access to all of the posts and replies to those posts. For example, in the pay-for-performance role-play, a teacher is attempting to convince a school board member that basing salary increases on increased test scores is not a valid measure of her teaching ability. The school board member replies that test scores are one of the few ways to empirically determine teaching ability.

Because all of the other students in the class have access to the teacher's and the school board member's posts, other students may then respond to either the teacher or the school board member. Students are therefore not attempting to convince only specific targeted audiences; they know that, as in any online forum, other audiences can respond to their exchanges. This means that students are simultaneously interacting with both single and multiple virtual audiences, a literacy essential to participation in online forums that address both the single "you" audience as well as the larger "they" audience (Graff & Birkenstein, 2007). In other words, writing online involves attending to the needs of a specific audience—the intended recipient of the posting—while also acknowledging that larger online audiences may also read the posting.

Hyperlinking: Connecting with Other Posts and Online Material. In creating their posts, students can create hyperlinks to each other posts, as well as to material on the Web. As reflected in cross-referencing links employed in the blogosphere or on social networking sites, creating links encourages students to draw on others' material within the context of an affinity group with shared expertise and interests (Gee, 2004).

One of the literacy practices involved in linking to others' ideas involves knowing how to engage in what Harris (2006) describes as "forwarding" others' ideas and positions in ways that enhance or illustrate students' positions. This forwarding also involves "*borrowing*: What you draw on, terms or ideas from other writers to use in thinking through your subject" (p. 39) and "*authorizing*: When you invoke the expertise or status of another writer to support your thinking" (p. 39). By linking to others' ideas, students are also ideally engaged in "*extending*: When you put your own spin on the terms of concepts that you take from other texts" (p. 39), in which they develop their own alternative arguments that push the shared argument in new directions.

Multimodality: Uses of Images or Videos as Visual Arguments. Visual images or video serve as powerful persuasion tools for engaging audiences (Selfe & Selfe, 2008). Students can import images and video into their posts to portray their stances on certain positions. For example, if they are arguing about issues of global warming, they can include images of melting Arctic ice or video of severe weather.

An Online Role-Play About Issues of Internet Access and Privacy

To illustrate the use of online role-play to teach collaborative argument, we cite the example of an online role-play conducted by a group of suburban high school students. The teacher who organized this role-play, Elizabeth Boeser, had used online role-play activities in the 2007–2008 school year with her composition classes at a suburban high school in the Midwest. In Fall, 2008, Elizabeth created a role-play focused on the issue of online privacy, asking specifically whether administrators have the right to access students' social networking sites as well as whether schools have a right to block access to Internet sites. Students were engaged with this topic because they knew that in a neighboring high school, students were suspended for violating athletic rules governing their alcohol use, violations that were discovered by school administrators

from pictures of their drinking on students' Facebook entries. In preparation for this role-play, students read the futuristic novel, *Little Brother* (Doctorow, 2008) (http://craphound.com/littlebrother/download), which portrays a teen hacker coping with government use of technology to control citizens.

A key aspect of this role-play was that students knew that, following the online role-play, they would be addressing the school's current Internet policies, which did not adequately address these issues and thus making recommendations to the school administration about needed changes to these policies. Consistent with a rhetoric of significance and transformation, the students were motivated to address what they perceived to be a significant issue that affected their life in school. They therefore perceived their writing not as simply fulfilling an assignment, but as contributing to transforming the status quo through making recommendations to change the school's policies on Internet use.

In preparation for the role-play, students analyzed the school policies and met with school administrators. They knew that while they may disagree with each other in the role-play, they would ultimately need to collaboratively craft a set of convincing recommendations for needed changes. Students then constructed their roles by developing a biographical sketch and including an avatar image. They each created a digital map using Bubbl.us—an online brainstorming site—to chart the different "pro" versus "con" roles in terms of their links to each other based on shared positions and power relationships.

Formulating Positions and Supporting Reasons

Students formulated their arguments on a discussion forum on a Ning social networking site (set to private and invited participants only). One student who adopted the role of a lawyer for the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union (MCLU) argued that by blocking access and searching students' social networking sites, the school positioned students as "suppressed under all of these boundaries as though they have committed wrongdoings regarding their personal affairs." This student went on to defend student rights, stating that "Sooner or later, there will be extensive security measures they [the students] will all have to suffer through simply because they are not 'trusted' in a school environment."

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Rather than examine this issue in terms of students' personal needs, this student, playing the role of a lawyer, framed the issue more in global-economic terms related to students' need to acquire technological skills to be competitive in the workplace and with other countries.

In formulating their positions, students recognized the need to work within and build onto their co-discussants' stances. To do so, students often enacted Harris' (2006) practice of forwarding. For example, in response to the MCLU lawyer's argument about the suppression of student's rights, a student who represented the school conservative organization noted:

> As a student at the high school, I respectfully disagree with the argument that students feel suppressed by the rules and guidelines. And do you have any proof to back up your statement about possible "Security Measures" that may occur in the future?

Another student, who assumed the role of an active Internet user, was critical of the school student handbook statement on Internet use policies:

> I don't think the student handbook really spells out what the rules for Internet use really are. They are quite vague and I quote rule number 1, "Use of the Internet is for educational purposes." How do you define what an educational purpose is? If I get stuck with a project on the NRA how I am expected to get information on my project topic if it is blocked. That cannot be filed as a non-educational topic if I get assigned to it!

Another student, playing the role of the teacher advisor to the school organization Youth Against War and Racism, extends this argument, noting the significance of blocking sites as denying students access to knowledge:

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> Today I was attempting to do some research for our next Youth Against War and Racism meeting and I came upon a school Block when I was looking for abu ghraib, and SURPRISE! It's Blocked. It's blocked for Obscene/ Tasteless content. Do you know what I find Obscene and Tasteless? The idea that a school has a right to hide things from students. Are we communists that we are going to restrict what our students can know? No. A healthy society is an educated society. Where are students to get educated if not at school. If we are selective about what we teach them how can we call ourselves educators. Ignorance may be bliss but bliss is inherently dangerous. What other websites are being blocked and what else is this school trying to hide?

Students also made use of links to related events, for example, in including a link to the Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA), which was re-introduced in the House of Representatives in 2007 but not yet enacted (as of Fall, 2008). The act would require schools to block social networking sites and chat rooms or lose federal Internet subsidies. Another role, a hall-monitor, referenced the Electronic Freedom Foundation (EFF), noting that

> the EFF did a study and concluded "Blocking software overblocks and underblocks, that is, the software blocks access to many web pages protected by the First Amendment and does not block many of the web pages that children's internet protection act would likely prohibit."

Students also engaged in collaborative argument by noting their agreement with other students regarding blocked sites or difficulties understanding the current Internet usage policies, agreements that contributed to a collective construction of the significance of the problem. For example, students shared their complaints about the difficulties with understanding or implementing the current school Internet usage policies, leading them to recognize that there was a critical mass of students who identified the significance of the issue and the need for proposed changes in these policies. In an interview reflection on the need for change, the student who adopted the role of an Internet hacker noted that:

> The school is stuck. We need to make change in the system. There's no justification for why sites are blocked...if these sites were available in school, it may deter students from posting stupid pictures of themselves doing illegal activities.

Reflecting on a Repository of Posts

One advantage of conducting an online role-play is that students can reflect on their use of argument strategies by reviewing a repository of their posts. During the role-play, students applied rubrics to reflect on the development of their roles, statement and support of position, acknowledgment of counter-arguments, and identification with audience.

At the completion of the role-play, students stepped out of their roles to reflect on the role-play itself. They reflected on which roles, including their own, were perceived as having agency—defined in terms of framing an ethical case for the need for change (Flower, 2008), how certain beliefs or discourses shaped their positions, whether they changed their roles' or their own beliefs and what led to those changes, and how the role-play would lead to proposing changes in status quo. Students then wrote persuasive essays based on their own and others' arguments formulated during the role-play. These essays then served as material for crafting a collective set of policy recommendations for school officials.

The fact that they were making recommendations to the school reflects a rhetoric of transformation in that students engaged in authentic argument on a topic that had both real significance and impact in their lives. Furthermore, their engagement was motivated by the genuine purpose of revising school policy and transforming the status quo of their school reality. By engaging in argumentation through online role-play, the students perceived effective argumentation as more than presenting a list of evidence and reasons, but also a practice of identifying the arguments and values of multiple audiences to enter into and build upon the discussion of the issue. In this sense, online role-play hones the practices of argumentation that extend beyond the classroom or static debate forums to discussing issues at the dinner table or in coffee shops, the blogosphere, or social networks.

In these online role-plays, students also engage in perspective-taking through adopting different roles

and espousing beliefs that differ from their own personal beliefs. One student noted that once students "started disagreeing with me, that really made you think about the different viewpoints coming your way, but then I had to write about what I feel about the issue." Another student noted that she normally writes from her own perspective, but in the role-play she had to recognize others' perspectives to move toward collaboration with others:

> I have to read what others wrote; I have to take in their concerns; I have to build my argument upon what they say. I can't get emotionally tied to it.... I'm anxious to see what other people write so that I can write back.

Acknowledging alternative perspectives is essential for collaborative argument that builds on multiple ideas for addressing problems in the status quo leading to change. In making proposals for improving the school's Internet policies, the students drew upon a range of different ideas emanating from their online role-play.

How Online Role-Play Facilitates Collaborative Argument

In rethinking teaching of persuasive writing and argumentation, we foreground the literacy practices of collaborative argument associated with students' everyday online exchanges. Whether students are consuming media content online or creating their own content through posting messages on blogs, YouTube, or other social networking sites, they are filtering information, building personas, identifying audiences, and formulating arguments. Online role-play facilitates students' ability to engage in collaborative argument leading to challenging beliefs about status quo systems and formulating proposals for changing systems through adopting a rhetoric of significance and transformation.

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