

**Richard Andrews, *Argumentation in Higher Education: Improving Practice Through Theory and Research*.** New York: Routledge, 2010, 219 pp., \$44.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-415-99501-6.

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## **Introduction**

Richard Andrews's *Argumentation in Higher Education* is intended for those who teach and study argumentation at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Andrews, Professor in English at the University of London's Institute of Education, aims to balance three imperatives:

1. doing justice to the importance and complexity of argumentation as a situated knowledge-making practice;
2. mapping a wide range of theory and research on teaching and assessing argumentation; and
3. offering useful pedagogical strategies for a variety of teaching situations.

While balancing these three imperatives is a tall order, *Argumentation in Higher Education* succeeds in its aims. Thus, I recommend it to researchers and teachers of post-secondary argumentation, particularly for its attention to the relationships between generic and discipline-specific argumentation skills. Readers in the United States will recognize the urgency of better understanding these relationships. Most U.S. universities require students to pass two first-year composition (FYC) courses that aim, in part, to teach the basics of some conception of "college-level argumentation."

While an American university audience will find this book especially helpful, post-secondary teachers in other systems will also welcome the book. After all, argumentation is one set of core competencies we all aim to foster, though we might choose different means for fostering it.

What follows are summaries and evaluations of the twelve chapters, showing not only the shape but the substance of the journey on which Andrews takes readers. Andrews's book might be said to have an hourglass shape. The first chapters have a wide focus and establish fundamentals such as defining argumentation and mapping the current state of argumentation in higher education. The middle chapters focus on particular concerns such as argumentation in multiple modes and students' views on argumentation. Finally, the book again widens its focus with chapters on research methodologies and directions for future teaching and research.

## 1. The Book

**Chapter 1** ("Why Argument?") grounds the rest of the book in selected core definitions, problems, and theories. Andrews distinguishes between argumentation (the process, sequence, or exchange of arguments) and argument (the products of such a process). Andrews focuses the book on the more general and inclusive term, argumentation, which he defines as "a logical or quasi-logical sequence of ideas that is supported by evidence" (p. 3). This sequence of ideas may be written, spoken, or presented in other modes (*ibid*). Argumentation is more than simple discussion; rather, it has a "critical aspect" of "discussion with edge" (*ibid*).

As part of his focus on improving teaching and practice, Andrews offers excerpts of two undergraduate essays from students in the field of educational studies. The first essay would likely be read (at least if Andrews can stand in for most teacher-readers) as an attempt to establish an exigency and a point of view, but largely through generalities and with self-defeating contradictions. Worse, the essay engages with source material by simply transferring it from one place (the source) to another (the essay) without unpacking it in service of an argued point. By contrast, the second essay announces a clear focus on an ongoing scholarly conversation about an im-

portant and arguable issue, a conversation in which the student intends to take a well-defined stand.

So how can we help students argue more like the second student than the first? As part of the answer, Andrews urges readers to see argumentation as “meta-modal” because it is concerned with making distinctions, exploring and deepening engagement with ideas, and using evidence to persuade audiences in multiple modes (p. 11). Argumentation operates through careful thought and it is motivated by an overall disposition towards rationality (ibid.). However, it is not necessarily the province of any particular mode (ibid.). Andrews contends that argumentation mediates between, on the one hand, the realm of abstractions and higher-order thinking processes and, on the other hand, the practical concerns of particular choices that students might make in the process of composing for an audience. This role for argumentation echoes the distinction that Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) draw between the universal audience and the particular audience with argumentation as the process of negotiating between abstract rationality and practical effectiveness.

To help teachers understand this mediating role he sees for argumentation, Andrews offers brief overviews of selected concepts from Bakhtin, Vygotsky, and Habermas. These overviews situate the development of students’ argumentation skills where such development belongs: at the core of what universities should aim to achieve, so long as higher education is to mean something more than merely longer schooling.

**Chapter 2** (“The Current State of Argumentation in Higher Education”) helps to show the need for improving teaching and assessment of argumentation in higher education. As Andrews explains, American universities teach rhetoric and argumentation explicitly, though this teaching often takes place, at least in first-year courses, in contexts where it is assumed that the genres, skills, and behaviors of one type of situation (usually some variant of essayistic literacy) will transfer to other types of situations. It should be pointed out that scholars within American rhetoric and composition have used activity theory to question the assumptions and usefulness of what David Russell calls “GWSI” (Generic Writing Skills Introduction) courses, courses that aim to teach students how to do “academic discourse” or “college-level

writing.” (For a sample of such critiques, see Russell 1995, Downs and Wardle 2007, and Wardle 2009). However, given the ubiquity of FYC (first-year composition) courses in American universities, and the widespread practice of hiring contingent labor each term to teach those courses cheaply, one can expect the GWSI paradigm to persist, resulting in continued uneven teaching and learning of argumentation.

Andrews positions argumentation in an intermediate middle location between theory and practice and differentiates it from rhetoric by placing rhetoric (conceptually) above argumentation. For Andrews, rhetoric encompasses the “arts of discourse,” by which he means “the craft and design of communication” for an audience and purpose (p. 29). In this way, rhetoric is “a broader and less functional category” than argumentation (p. 29). While students are obviously required to demonstrate their ability to argue, they often compose arguments within artificial, generic situations in which argumentation seems more a grade-driven rite of passage than occasion for intellectual growth. At its worst, as Elizabeth Wardle (2009) points out in “Mutt Genres,” such occasions for argumentation can conflate the genre with the purpose, as in an assignment to write a “persuasive paper” (p. 777). Outside the university walls, people argue using whichever genre and modes are most appropriate and potentially effective, but argumentation in the school context often assumes that verbal discourse and scholastic genres suffice for most purposes and contexts.

**Chapter 3** (“Generic Skills in Argumentation”) asks readers to consider the question of broad-based, transferable skills in argumentation. What are they? To begin answering that question, Andrews briefly surveys influential models of the process of argumentation, including the familiar Toulmin (1958) model (data, claim, warrant, backing, qualifier, rebuttal), Mitchell and Riddle’s (2000) simplification of Toulmin (the “triangle” model), his own model of a fully-fledged argument incorporating Applebee’s (1978) narrative development and Vygotsky’s (1986) concept development, and a compositional model offered by Kaufer and Geisler (1991) (the “faulty path/return path” describing how arguers position themselves in the context of others’ arguments). As Andrews notes, these models assume a largely verbal orientation, to the exclusion of visual argumentation. Andrews challenges us to consider whether images can argue (as opposed to just persuade) be-

cause, he contends, they can be inductive propositions rather than translations of verbally constructed propositions.

That claim carries significant consequences for the teaching of argumentation – for example, in FYC courses – because the teaching of argumentation has often relegated the realm of the visual to the status of the purely emotional appeal, impoverishing students' understandings of and fluency in argumentation. While some assignments in generic FYC courses include images, they are often simple analysis assignments that only ask students to critique visual argumentation from the “outside in” (as critics), rather than practice it from the “inside out” (as producers). Thus, students may, for example, analyze print or filmed advertisements, but they will do so by writing “analysis papers” nearly indistinguishable from papers their grandparents might have written when they took FYC. Such practices only reinforce a hierarchy in which the verbal trumps the visual as somehow inherently more rational.

Andrews concludes this chapter by calling for more studies of argumentation in education as it is actually practiced. As he does with all of the book's chapters, Andrews includes a section entitled “The Practical Dimension” that could be a good resource for faculty development, teaching, or reexamination of course outcomes. Here, Andrews asks readers to consider their own implied or preferred models of argumentation, and to perhaps bring students into the conversation. Where are the models useful? What are their limits? How do students use or judge them?

**Chapter 4** (“Discipline-Specific Skills in Argumentation”) is the result of a pilot study of argumentation as taught to first-year undergraduates in selected U.S. and British universities. Along with Andrews, Carole Torgerson and Beng-Huat See are credited as chapter authors. The pilot study examined argumentation as taught in history, biology, and electronic engineering/electronics. This chapter blends study findings, literature review, student survey and focus group data, and interviews of teachers.

Andrews and his team found that first-year students believe that argumentation is important in their disciplines, but they sometimes struggle to find their places as arguers instead of acolytes receiving basic knowledge. Students also expressed a need for more explicit instruction in argumentation – instruction that goes beyond simply describing the desired surface

features of a “good argument” in a particular field, that provides concrete examples of outstanding and failing performances, that offers early formative feedback on students’ arguments in process, and that provides chances for students to discuss argumentation with their instructors.

Because students don’t always get the instruction they need, they tend to fall back on argumentation skills developed in their earlier education, a dangerous strategy because higher education contexts usually call for critical engagement, not mere summary or appreciation of information. Another finding, perhaps related to the previous one, is that students are overly deferential and passive in their academic reading, often seeing themselves as mere absorbers of others’ claims and evidence. Small wonder, then, that they struggle with producing critical readings and with assignments that require them to take a stand within an ongoing scholarly conversation. Teaching styles (particularly formative response to arguments in progress), the explicitness (or vagueness) of teacher expectations, teachers’ widely varying competencies in teaching argumentation, and whether argumentation is assessed formally all affect how students see the role of argumentation in their disciplines.

Reading students’ views and teacher interviews together, the authors argue that some disciplines see argumentation as central, even at the beginning levels (e.g., case-building and evidence in history), while others see it as something to be reserved for later once students gain basic subject matter competence (e.g., electrical engineering). However, because all disciplines see argumentation as important to undergraduates’ success, the authors recommend that individual departments or professional organizations re-examine how best to teach argumentation in their fields, particularly with regard to improving teachers’ feedback to students.

**Chapter 5** (“The Balance Between Generic and Discipline-Specific Skills”) builds on the previous two chapters to argue that some argumentation skills are generic while others emerge in discipline-specific contexts. Andrews identifies seven generic skills:

1. Generating the argument by identifying the points in dispute and positioning the argument as addressing a substantive problem;

2. Developing the argument by mapping its goal and how to reach that goal (Andrews uses the Kaufer and Geisler model);
3. Defining the stance or position, including the subtle art of reading sources for gaps or roads not taken;
4. Structuring the argument and balancing flexibility with the need to help students start from somewhere;
5. Expressing the argument by working out matters of style, voice, and clarity;
6. Refining the argument by tailoring it to the particular circumstances, audiences, and modes of delivery (e.g., essay vs. presentation vs. dissertation defense); and
7. Testing the argument's soundness, for which Andrews recommends a Toulminian approach.

Each discipline will, of course, have its own practices defining what counts as evidence, how arguments are to be presented, and which genres and modes are most valued. Andrews asks teachers to help students become more fluent in their own disciplines' ways of making knowledge through argumentation. Such a fluency negotiates between skills shared across disciplines, and skills that require immersion in a particular set of practices. Andrews does not – indeed, cannot – provide definitive answers to achieving this balance. However, Andrews challenges teachers to make the contours of higher education's argumentative terrain more apparent to students, and this chapter provides terms for meeting that challenge.

**Chapter 6** (“Information and Communication Technologies, Multimodality and Argumentation”) examines both argumentation that uses multiple modes and the use of information communication technologies to examine or teach argumentation.

In the first half of the chapter, Andrews sets out to complicate the assumption that images can suggest or persuade but cannot argue. Andrews points out that images can argue based on proximity (juxtaposition, development of a theme), by number/sequence (as in a photographic essay), and by interplay with other modes (as in advertisements). In offering a close reading of a student multimodal composition blending spoken, written, vi-

sual, and aural modes, Andrews argues that examining the dominant mode in a work or unpacking the tensions between modes can reveal that “the argument will lie somewhere on a scale from the inductive and suggestive at one end to the highly abstract and determined at the other” (p. 110). In other words, there is no a priori limit to the argumentative competence or potential inherent in any particular mode.

The second half of the chapter surveys studies on argumentation pedagogy that uses information communication technologies (ICTs), such as online discussion boards. The chief contribution of this portion of the chapter is to remind teachers of that informal written communication often serves as a hybrid between spoken and written discourse, a reminder that could help improve the quality of discussions, feedback, and student awareness of audience in argumentation.

**Chapter 7** (“Further Evidence from Research”) draws on Andrews’s collaborative work with others that examined existing research on students’ preparation and experience in argumentation before the undergraduate level (specifically, 7-14 year olds). From that study, Andrews and his collaborators derived five general conditions that must be in place for successful teaching and learning of argumentative writing:

1. A writing process model that fosters invention, drafting, editing, and revision;
2. Self-motivation;
3. Training in reasoning (along with the growth in reasoning that occurs simply by maturing);
4. Peer collaboration and feedback; and
5. Explicit, clear explanation of argumentation competencies to be learned (p. 117-118).

As uncontroversial and worthwhile as these general conditions are, Andrews notes that they are often not mentioned in research, an omission that undermines the effectiveness of research to inform practice.

Within the environment of these general conditions, five pedagogical strategies best help students learn argumentation:

1. Heuristics (scaffolded generative strategies of invention);
2. Practice in oral argument, counter-argument, and rebuttal, particularly in helping students see argumentation as dialogic;
3. Explicit goals and audiences for writing;
4. Teacher modeling of good argument writing; and
5. Coaching (p. 118-29).

Of these conditions and strategies, students' self-motivation can often be a stumbling block, particularly in an FYC course, in which some students begin the course perceiving it as a mere hoop to jump through, a course to be gotten "out of the way." The presence of Advanced Placement and other means of "testing out of" FYC courses, along with troubling staffing practices, further the impoverished perception of such courses. How can students become truly self-motivated (rather than cynically motivated only by grades) if the course is both subtly and not-so-subtly positioned in these ways?

The chapter ends with brief overviews of the contexts and purposes of teaching argumentation to students from elementary school to graduate school. At each of these stages, the question of what can be transferred from one level to the next, and how teachers can guide students to position themselves within a body of knowledge must be reexamined.

**Chapter 8** ("Students' Views on Argumentation") reports on a project in which first-year education students interviewed undergraduates in other disciplines about argumentation and the teaching of argumentation in their disciplines. The chapter provides snapshot case studies of the experiences of students in seven disciplines, ranging from science to humanities to nursing. Those case studies are useful for illuminating the ways in which different disciplines teach argumentation, which modes and genres are most important, and how students learn to "do" argumentation in different disciplines. Andrews asks teachers to consider replicating his student interview project, a suggestion that I plan to follow in my own teaching, and soon. A campus-wide project involving students and teachers, and that triangulates different kinds of evidence and research methods, could yield findings that help improve curricula.

**Chapter 9** (“Students’ Essays and Reports in a Range of Disciplines”) sets forth a very brief history of the essay and its centrality within the rationalist, humanistic project of higher education, a project that favors clarity of thought and expression; fair, substantive engagement with the ideas of others; and the use of evidence to support an arguable position. The chapter gives two examples of essay introductions from the same student, one in a literature course and one in a music course, reading both introductions closely to compare how the student uses generic and specific skills to clear a space for his or her own argumentation. The chapter concludes with an overview of alternatives to the essay, such as dialogues and even suggests unconventional approaches to the most hidebound genre: the doctoral dissertation.

As I have found in my own teaching, some students better understand the goals and purposes of essay writing once they have had a chance to step outside of it by composing in different modes and genres. At the same time, students also need guided, theoretically grounded practice with argumentation in whichever modes and genres serve the twin aims of reason and effectiveness in a particular situation.

**Chapter 10** (“The Significance of Feedback from Lecturers”) continues the book’s commitment to grounding discussions of practices in selected examples, in this case offering examples of feedback on students’ written arguments. As always, issues of timing, purpose, amount, and mode of feedback predominate. As any writing teacher knows, responding to student writing is what consumes most of a teacher’s time. For example, how and when the teacher handles the roles of formative coach and summative judge often makes a difference in how students develop as arguers.

The examples Andrews offers show how feedback can either represent a missed opportunity (as when teachers concentrate on surface or generic features) or one of the best ways to guide students’ growth (as when teachers use feedback to position students as fellow inquirers). Andrews offers a productive suggestion for improving practice: collect examples of actual feedback given to students to examine how students are being guided, to what ends, and with what level of attention to the purposes of feedback.

**Chapter 11** (“Methodological Issues in Researching Argumentation”) attempts to expand researchers’ storehouse of possibilities and methods for

examining argumentation. *Questions such as where is argumentation to be found? and what counts as evidence?* have consequences for what we claim to know and teach about argumentation. On page 186, Andrews lists key questions to ask about evidence, a list that will benefit both researchers and first-year students alike.

**Chapter 12** (“Conclusion and a Way Forward in Argumentation Studies in Education”) concludes by asking what remains to be researched about argumentation in higher education and how future research might be aided by the book’s contributions. This final chapter examines graduate work, in this case, theses from four students who completed master’s programs in the UK (three in education, one in engineering). Andrews points out that while student work is often viewed as insufficiently critical, students are not often taught clearly just how to demonstrate critical competence. Even at the graduate level, some disciplines in England and Wales see argumentation as a communication skill but not as central to the discipline’s discourses and knowledge-making. As a result, argumentation, despite its centrality to UK culture and to student success, is under-studied and under-taught, leading students to rely on trial and error. Trial and error can lead, as is the case (particularly with two of the education theses) to under-argued, largely expository writing performances. Andrews urges teachers to teach students to look beyond the surface features of particular genres to clarify for students what the “deeper assumptions that underpin the genre” are (p. 202).

In analyzing the engineering thesis, Andrews notes that the main contribution of the student’s research was in the form of software, not necessarily the thesis document itself. As one of Andrews’s colleagues observed, the core contributions of some current dissertation and theses can be found in allegedly ancillary materials, such as appendices. Andrews suggests that if non-textual material is at the heart of a graduate project, then the genre should allow for it to be central, even if that means sometimes breaking away from the time-honored textual genres.

What makes a writing performance critical as opposed to merely expository? As Andrews shows, students need to learn to weigh sources, to disagree responsibly with sources, and to read sources critically in the first place. These are skills that must be taught explicitly. If used wisely (that is, generatively rather than as a simple mold), storehouses of phrases that make

common argumentative moves ( “Though I concede that \_\_\_\_\_, I still insist that \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_”) found in resources such as Graff and Birkenstein’s (2006) textbook make the game of “they say/I say” easier for students to master. Having students read sources critically, looking specifically for the “moves” that sources make (rather than simply reading for “the main point”) also reinforces the critical reading/critical writing connection.

Andrews concludes the chapter, and the book as a whole, by returning to the relationships between multimodal communication theory and argumentation theory, arguing that each can enhance the other. For argumentation theory, multimodal communication might expand models and studies of argumentation, which to date have been chiefly textual and verbal. For multimodal theory, argumentation theory differentiates between persuasion and argument and can provide methods for analyzing argumentative soundness. Andrews ends the book by urging readers to remember that knowledge progresses through a “willingness to enter the fire, to get to the center of intellectual inquiry...where argument operates” (p. 219). This passage provides a fitting end to a text that balances breadth and depth to help readers understand and improve the teaching of argumentation – that is, the teaching of how knowledge and inquiry work – at all levels of higher education.

## 2. Evaluation

It is perhaps an unspoken element of the book review genre to raise a quibble, even in a positive review. While one should review the book the author actually wrote rather than the book the reviewer wishes they had written, I was surprised that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s *The New Rhetoric* was absent from a book on argumentation. *The New Rhetoric*’s concepts of universal versus particular audiences and starting points of argumentation could have enhanced Andrews’s fine theoretical and practical work. But that minor omission does not diminish the value of *Argumentation in Higher Education*. Armed with this book, teachers and researchers will be well-equipped indeed to “enter the fire.”

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