INTRODUCING ARGUMENT:
CRITICAL READING FOR WRITING

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Students in the Bachelor of Arts programme at Nanyang Technological University are required to take two semesters of Critical Reading and Writing, a course which has as its primary objective the development of academic writing skills. Many of the students enrolled in the course are able to cope quite well with narrative, descriptive, and general expository writing, but the majority have considerable difficulty with writing which requires taking a position on an issue and supporting it in a logical manner. In an effort to determine the kinds of problems these writers were having, over two hundred argumentative essays, written for placement purposes at the start of their first year of study, were analyzed. The question which the students were asked to write on was: 'A common complaint about Singaporean students is that they have a narrow world-view and are too textbook and/or examination-oriented. Agree or disagree with this statement and clearly explain the reasons for your view.'

Despite the injunction to 'clearly explain the reasons for your view,' many students wrote ineffective essays because they were unable to come up with relevant reasons and appropriate evidence to support their opinions. The excerpts which follow illustrate this common lack of support.
a) It is a fact that the general knowledge possessed by our teenagers are meagre. It can easily be seen by the percentage of scorers in the junior colleges' general paper. A low percentage will be perceived not because they have a low English standard but because of their lack of knowledge.

b) Another aspect whereby teenagers have proved to be textbook-oriented and lacking knowledge is television programs. Often the participants fail to answer a question of general knowledge. Probably, the participants will answer fluently and beautifully if the question asked is based on textbooks.

c) The workload of the current Singapore students is too heavy. Some have to manage between homework and extracurricular activities. For example, three years ago a report was made on the National University of Singapore students and their general knowledge. Some of the students did not even know who was the American President. (The answer was George Bush.)

d) The government is not trying to force the students to become textbook or examination-oriented. Examinations are just a way to grade the students according to their abilities. Not everyone can become a politician or work as a factory worker. Hence, we need to be extra careful when we come to allocation of these limited resources. The fear of losing among students makes the system look fearful.

e) I do not agree that Singapore's students are too examination-oriented and have narrow world-views. Take the recent 1993 SEA Games, for example. Singapore placed fourth in the medal tally, proving that we can study as well as do sports. Granted, not all the contestants were students at the time of their participation. But were the older contestants not once students in their lives? In the swimming event,
most of the contestants were youngsters who are still schooling. They not only attained medals, but also broke many records.

f) For arts, we have people who have done Singapore proud. Last year, a very young girl was admitted to a prestigious music school in London due to her talents in violin. Another girl was the first Singaporean and the only Asian who has graduated from a commerce school in Switzerland. All these examples dispute the negative profile that people have on Singapore students.

g) Complaints about Singapore students having a narrow world-view tend to be outdated. People who make such complaints seem to have the impression that school is still like what it was ten years ago. To their disappointment, complaints like those do not hold any more. Nowadays, schools have schemes like "overseas exchange programmes". This is where selected students are sent overseas to places like Australia, New Zealand, Japan or even Europe to experience different cultures and way of life. Thus, how can Singapore students be unworldly-wise?

h) The reason why students in the higher educational levels are not as textbook-oriented as those in the lower educational levels is that as students go higher in their studies, they naturally build up their vocabulary and, of course, more books and magazines are available to them. Nobody expects a primary three kid to read 'Time' thoroughly, but no one will laugh at a college student reading 'Archie'.

In addition to the lack of reasoning and support illustrated here, many students produced essays that were purely narrative or informative rather than argumentative. Their positions on the issue were often unstated or unclear, and conclusions were often
omitted altogether. Clearly, these writers did not have a basic understanding of how an argument is reasoned and structured.

Goh's (1994) recent report of essay writing at the pre-university level concludes that junior college students in Singapore show a clear preference for descriptive and narrative writing over argumentation. When students were asked why this was so, they reported that their teachers discouraged them from writing arguments because of their belief that it is harder to score high marks with an argumentative essay on the Cambridge General Paper. Goh concludes that the students are "hiding behind the safety of story-telling mode to convey what they want to say, expressing thoughts "as jumbled as their writing." (7)

The difficulty which these otherwise successful students have with writing arguments is understandable given the fact that they have had very little exposure to written argument. From their earliest years, stories were read to them. Then, when they began to read themselves, they read stories. When they began to write, they wrote narratives which were modeled on the stories they had heard and read. Even at the secondary level, the students' reading was either narrative or the kind of factual expository writing generally found in school textbooks.

Because they have had little or no experience with models of written argument during their school years, many students come into the university believing that argument means confrontation rather than persuasion by reasoning. They do not understand how an opinion differs from a fact, what counts as evidence, how claims are supported or how argumentative writing is structured. Yet recent evidence (Newkirk, 1989; O'Keeffe & Benoit, 1982) suggests that even very young children do engage in simple forms of argument in daily life. And McCann's (1989) study suggests that even at the primary
level, students are similar to adults in their ability to identify and rate texts as arguments.

If young children are capable of distinguishing good arguments from poor ones, how might we go about introducing argument into the curriculum at the primary level? To begin, we might make use of that with which they are already most familiar - narrative fiction - as a springboard to argument.

Bumiske (1991) suggests that argumentative thinking begins when teachers begin to ask 'why' questions rather than 'what' questions. He contends that while 'what' questions lead to summary and consensus, 'why' questions lead to analysis, argument, and discussion. In the discussion of a reading selection, for example, a 'why' question about the motivation of a particular character does not necessarily have one right answer. The question may lead to discussion and debate, to new insights and associations. The class can be encouraged to list their own 'why' questions, with each child choosing one to write about as a follow up to the reading and discussion. Those who write on the same question can discuss their answers and question one another's reasons.

Frowe (1989:56-57) contends that since giving reasons for a particular point of view is central to argument, it is the most appropriate starting point for developing argumentative thinking in children. He suggests exercises involving an event, perhaps from the children's reading, and the elicitation of reasons to explain why the event might have occurred. For example:

Event: The car will not start.

Children's reasons:
1 It's Friday.
2 There is no petrol in the tank.
3 The car is tired.
4 The car is being obstinate.
5 The battery is flat.

Children are then asked to evaluate each reason on a four point scale:

(a) impossible - this could never be the reason
(b) possible - this could be a reason but it is unlikely
(c) probable - this could be a reason and seems likely
(d) conclusive - this is the reason

Such exercises provide the children with opportunities to come up with reasons, evaluate competing reasons, and examine their own beliefs and presuppositions.

Yuen (1992:253) provides evidence that even kindergarten children can think critically about stories that are read to them. She describes how a class responded to a reading of the story *Who Will Be My Mother?* (Crowley, 1983), which begins, "Mother Sheep died. Lamb had no mother. 'Who will be my mother?'" At the end of the story, one of the children asked, "How did she die?" When the teacher replied that "maybe the author wanted us to decide how she died," the children came up with fifteen different answers, ranging from "She got old, fell over, and died" to "Maybe someone had some poison on the grass and she ate the grass." A follow-up discussion of which reasons seem the most likely - and why - would encourage the kind of thinking necessary for effective argumentation.

Lawson and Kral (1985:224) also believe that argumentation can be introduced through the reading and discussion of fictional works, particularly those which contain arguments or raise questions that can be answered only through hypothesis generation,
evidence gathering, and argumentation. They recommend that discussion be generated by the following types of questions:

Questions for hypothesis generation:

Why do you think that occurred?
Is this like something else you know about?
Are there other possibilities? If so, what are they?

Questions for testing of the hypothesis:

How do you know?
Why do you think that?
How can you be sure?

Questions to provoke the generation of predictions:

What does that imply?
If that were so, what would you expect to happen?

Questions for the drawing of conclusions:

What does this mean?
What conclusions can be drawn?

Questions such as these help to develop critical reading and argumentative thinking, necessary prerequisites for argumentative writing.

In addition to introducing the critical reading of narrative texts at the primary level, we need to introduce argumentative texts of an expository nature into the curriculum at the secondary level. Crowhurst (1990:355) reports on studies of student performance on argumentative tasks and concludes that "writing arguments . . . presents both cognitive difficulties and difficulties associated with lack of experience and lack of knowledge." She argues that students will more easily acquire appropriate forms and structures of argument if they are exposed to models of them and if the discussion of such models covers both content and structure.
At the secondary level, students need to be introduced to expository texts which embody reasoning. It is important that they read whole texts, not just excerpts, so that they learn how argumentative writing is structured. Discussion of the topics should be exploratory, including questions such as:

- Is the writer's conclusion reasonable? Why or why not?
- What evidence does the writer use to support the conclusion?
- Is it relevant? Is it adequate?

Students should also be encouraged to talk about their reactions to the text and the extent to which they agree or disagree with the writer, for they need to learn that every reader does not bring the same information, experience or attitude to a piece of writing. The teacher, in turn, should be open to different interpretations and reactions.

To introduce the notion of counterargument, students can be encouraged to challenge the writer. Teachers might make use of questions such as

- What do you disagree with?
- What questions would you want to ask the writer?
- What would you say to the writer if he or she were here?

Through critical reading and discussion of appropriate texts, students at the secondary level can develop an awareness of both the content and structure of written argument. They can learn that opinions need to be clearly stated and supported by relevant evidence and that opposing views need to be considered.

We cannot expect our students, even at the tertiary level, to write effective argumentative essays if they have not yet learned what is involved in argumentative
thinking. Critical discussion of narratives at the primary level and the introduction of argumentative texts at the secondary level can help to provide the kinds of reading and thinking experiences that promote greater understanding of what argument is -- and what it is not.
References


