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Dennis A. Lynch, Diana George, and Marilyn M. Cooper

Moments of Argument: Agonistic Inquiry and Confrontational Cooperation

Writing teachers have been teaching argument for decades. As a profession, we have taken generations of students through the laws of logic, the etiquette of dispute, and the lessons of preparedness only to receive in return the same stale and flat arguments on the big issues: abortion rights, gun control, affirmative action, and others just as large and just as canned. In their writings, our students fall easily into one of two camps: for or against. They cling to their original positions as if those were sacred to home, country, and spiritual identity. Too frequently absent from these debates is any real knowledge of the issue at hand as anything more than a pointless argument among people who do not care very much about the outcome—except that it is always better, in the classroom as in many other arenas, to be on the winning rather than the losing side.

We don't blame our students. Schooled, as so many of us are lately, on the heated but shallow public debates raging on such television programs as *Firing Line* and *Crossfire*, or the broadside attacks of Rush Limbaugh, or even the sleepy This-Side-Then-That-Side interviews of *MacNeil Lehrer Newshour*, our students merely follow their models. Students have learned to argue vigorously and even angrily, but not think about alternatives, or listen to each other, or determine how their position may affect others, or see complexities, or reconsider the position they began with, or even to make new connections across a range of possible disagreements. Louis Menand points out that "[o]ne of the techniques we've perfected for

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screaming at one another—as the linguist Deborah Tannen has recently been complaining—is to divide every discussion, 'Crossfire'-style, into two, and only two, diametrically opposed positions, and to have the representatives of each side blast away at each other single-mindedly until interrupted by a commercial" (76). Hardly a style that will generate new, productive lines of action.

Iris Marion Young locates one source of this pattern of public discourse in what she calls interest-group pluralism. All debates over public policy in our society, she argues, are reduced to debates over the distribution of wealth, income, and material goods, and interest groups are formed to ensure that particular interests get their fair share. "Public policy dispute is only a competition among claims, and 'winning' depends on getting others on your side" (72). This distributive paradigm forces even arguments for ending nonmaterially based oppression and dominance to look like arguments to attain the selfish desires of a particular interest group. Thus, for example, arguments for affirmative action programs appear not as attempts to change unconscious stereotypes that underlie biased hiring practices but as attempts to get more jobs for minorities. Young concludes, "This process that collapses normative claims to justice into selfish claims of desire lacks the element of public deliberation that is a hallmark of the political. A politicized public resolves disagreement and makes decisions by listening to one another's claims and reasons, offering questions and objections, and putting forth new formulations and proposals, until a decision can be reached" (72–73).

What we want to work out in this essay is a way of understanding and teaching argument that prepares students to participate in serious deliberations on issues that face all of us everyday. It sometimes seems, in recent arguments over argument, that we must choose between two contrasting styles of argument, competitive or collaborative, but such a decision is unnecessarily abstract and ignores the historical development of thought about argument and its role in social democratic processes. Throughout most of this century, as Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede argue (39), we have steadily moved away from argumentation as competition and contest. Since I. A. Richards defined rhetoric as the study of misunderstanding (thereby bringing rhetoric closer to hermeneutics), the prevailing sentiment has been in favor of a more cooperative conception of rhetoric. The ultimate aim of rhetoric should be communication, not persuasion, we are told. And later, the idea that rhetoric is epistemic and the correlate notions of rhetoric as inquiry and of writing to learn have continued the same general effort to expand rhetoric's horizons while diminishing or eliminating altogether the nasty clash of individual intentions that marks much traditional rhetorical practice and its theory.

More recently, though, some rhetoricians have begun to suspect that the whole point of argumentation is being lost in our talk about cooperation and collaboration, that we are losing the value of challenging, opposing, and resisting "the interplay of social, cultural and historical forces" that structure our lives (Bizzell, *Discourse* 284). Susan Jarratt, for example, calls for composition instructors to rethink their objections to agonistic rhetoric and conflict-based pedagogy. She acknowledges that, at this historical juncture, those who advocate a "nurturing, nonconflictual composition classroom" may feel uneasy with her suggestion ("Feminism" 120). Indeed, as bell hooks points out (*Talking Back* 53), students may not leave the class feeling all that comfortable, either. Nevertheless, Jarratt and others (among them Bizzell, Bauer, Berlin, and Fitts and France) continue to argue that teachers should take a stronger, less nurturing, and more confrontational role in the classroom—especially if the aim is to prepare students to take action in a bureaucratized world that resists change.

Peter Elbow has argued that we neutralize potential hostility by emphasizing the believing game over the doubting game. While this position encourages students to listen to each other and to think about alternatives, Jarratt points out that it also leaves unexamined the social origins of difference and untouched the existing structures of privilege and authority ("Feminism" 116–17). Students—as well-schooled in the ideology of pluralism as in the habits of popular debate—are eager to grant the right of everyone to their own opinion. A theoretical openness to other perspectives is, though, easily reversed in practice, especially when the situatedness of perspectives within established power structures is ignored, as when whites insist that blacks, or men insist that women, be more open to and accepting of their perspectives.

What we are seeking is a way of reconceiving argument that includes both confrontational and cooperative perspectives, a multifaceted process that includes moments of conflict and agonistic positioning as well as moments of understanding and communication. We want to see argument as agonistic inquiry or as confrontational cooperation, a process in which people struggle over interpretations together, deliberate on the nature of the issues that face them, and articulate and rearticulate their positions in history, culture, and circumstance. And thus we join with Jarratt in hoping for writing courses where "instructors help their students to see how differences emerging from their texts and discussions have more to do with those contexts than they do with an essential and unarguable individuality" ("Feminism" 121). Such a conception can remove argument from the (televised) boxing ring and return it not to the private domestic sphere but to the many ambiguous public spaces—meeting rooms, hallways, cafeterias, and, yes, classrooms—where it has a chance to become

more productive. The question that confronts us now is, what exactly might such a conception of argument look like? What kind of activity are we trying to suggest by the admittedly difficult (if not oxymoronic) expressions "agonistic inquiry" and "confrontational cooperation"?

A New Articulation

Before we describe two different courses in which we attempted to put into practice our understanding of how argument might best be approached in first-year composition, we would like to briefly articulate the theoretical perspective that emerged as we tried to find a new paradigm for the teaching of argument.

Our concern from the start was that, without knowledge of the history behind an issue of those affected or potentially affected by it, or of the complex material causes and potential real effects of the decisions being made, classrooms could easily drive students back into a narrower kind of arguing. Jarratt, in "Feminism and Composition," shows her awareness of such a potential problem when she argues for a distinction between "eristic wrangling" and "disputation." Wrangling takes place, according to Jarratt, between people who position themselves from the start as enemies, whereas disputation acknowledges that conflict also plays a role among friends who argue with one another out of good will. Disputation, which draws on the "ability to move into different positions," should then open up the space needed for more considered judgments and disagreements.

However, the point of Jarratt's distinction often seems on the edge of slipping away, for instance, when she quotes bell hooks urging us to establish in the classroom "... an atmosphere where [students] may be afraid or see themselves at risk" ("Feminism" 120). If we emphasize the fear and the risk, we can see the aggressive and agonistic qualities of traditional debate returning to the classroom, together with its narrowness and simplicity. The weight placed by Jarratt on conflict, on the necessary emergence of real differences, and especially on the need for students who have been disempowered to become more "self-assertive" in the classroom may push students toward strategies of simplification as a matter of survival. But if instead we emphasize, as Jarratt later does, a classroom "in which students argue about the ethical implications of discourse on a wide range of subjects and, *in so doing, come to identify their personal interests with others,* understand those interests as implicated in a large communal setting, and advance them in a public voice" ("Feminism" 121, emphasis added), then we hear an echo of John Gage and what we have called a cooperative rhetoric of inquiry.

In an essay that in some interesting ways anticipates Jarratt's position, "An Adequate Epistemology For Composition," Gage suggests that we

might clarify our disagreements over the best way to teach argument by attending to the epistemological bases of the modes of argumentation we are considering. Toward this end, he offers his own distinction among three views of argument. The first two views disconnect rhetoric from knowledge—either skeptically or positivistically—and turn it into an artifice or a vehicle. An argument, under both of these views, becomes a mere formal exercise. In the first case, unencumbered by any sense of truth or right, one concentrates on learning and employing those forms that will help one to win or survive. In the second case, one has recourse to rhetorical forms because ideas—truths—still need to be embodied and communicated: argument thus becomes a mere vehicle for leading an audience to a truth known independently of the rhetorical process. The third view, in contrast to the other two, connects rhetoric to dialectic and to the social production of knowledge, and, as we might expect, Gage associates this view with Aristotle:

> From this perspective, rhetoric aims at knowledge, or makes it available. Rather than producing persuasion without reference to truth, rhetoric aims at producing mutual understandings and therefore becomes the basis for inquiry into sharable truths. "The function of rhetoric," Aristotle asserted, "is to deal with things about which we deliberate, but for which we have no rules." ("Adequate Epistemology" 153–55)

Gage thus seeks to contain the eristic impulses within argumentation by linking argument to the production of knowledge—though disagreeing, people cooperate to make connections in the construction of "sharable truths." This is not knowledge in the modernist sense—objective and timeless truth—but a knowledge that is true only insofar as it emerges from the social, cooperative process of argumentation.

People argue, according to Gage, in order to negotiate conflicts and differences. We do not argue in order to express our inner selves or as a fun exercise, though we can approach argument in this way if we so choose. The primary function of argument, therefore, the one Young argues is necessary for public deliberation and that Gage would have us consider as teachers of writing, is to get something done in the world, including the academic world. And given the kinds of issues we tend to discuss in the academic world, according to Gage, we cannot and should not expect to rely on truths or independent formal guarantees that would render the negotiation process mechanical and easy. All we can do is come together (in some fashion), articulate our differences, listen, try hard to understand, acknowledge how thoroughgoing the differences may be, and—and here is Gage's main contribution, as he sees it—not just formulate reasons that defend our initial position, but reformulate those very positions through a

process of argument ("Adequate Epistemology" 162). In other words, the real conflicts are already there at the outset of a disagreement, in the way we define the issues and set up our purposes, and thus when teachers ask students to establish their position *before* they interact with those with whom they disagree, teachers inadvertently push students to reproduce their disagreements rather than moving towards negotiated and temporary resolutions of disagreements.

Gage's approach to argument perhaps sounds closer than it probably is to the work of Jarratt, Bizzell, and others who have been critical of a humanist tradition (with its connections to Aristotle) and who look instead to postmodern theories or look behind Aristotle to the sophists. Yet even so, a lingering concern might remain for many who would read (or reread) Gage's work in the present context of composition studies: careful as he is to emphasize the thoroughly social and dialectical nature of his approach to argument, his account still lacks a fully social and political dimension. This is perhaps most visible in his characterization of conflict. When Gage sets his students up to argue with one another, the aim that he assumes will govern their efforts *is* to negotiate conflict—but the conflicts he imagines are what he calls "conflicts of knowledge." What is at stake in any argumentative situation for Gage is the current state of one's knowledge or beliefs, and even though he is careful to stress that people, not ideas, are in conflict—the "real people" that he reaches for in his account of argument often seem at the last minute to gently dissolve into mere place holders for the ideas they are committed to. The effect is especially apparent when one recalls that the conflicts our students experience are reflected in the structure of our social, political, and economic conditions—and thus are not contained in the minds of individual students. Put otherwise, the social production of knowledge that Gage so engagingly argues for remains a mostly abstract and intellectual affair because the extent to which his students enter into their arguments already positioned unequally itself remains unquestioned.

But if we hesitate to embrace the limited sense of "social" in Gage's social rhetoric of inquiry, neither are we fully satisfied with Jarratt's pedagogy of "productive conflict." In this regard, we intend our provisional and somewhat playful notion of "agonistic inquiry" to delineate an activity that is a social process of negotiating, not "conflicts of knowledge," so much as conflicts of positioning and power—conflicts in which students can discern that something is at stake, someone is affected, and someone has been silenced for reasons that can be determined.

Indeed, the differences among Gage's, Jarratt's, and our positions can perhaps better be seen in the manner in which we each describe the kind of risks we anticipate our students will face in our classrooms. In Gage's

contribution to *What Makes Writing Good,* for instance, he asks his students to "risk committing yourself, if only for the time being, to an idea," and he sees such a commitment as a risk because it "means that there will be people who will not agree with you" (100). To argue is to commit yourself, not to others, but to an idea, and to be committed to an idea ensures that you will run into conflicts and disagreements with others. The risk for students, in other words, is that by connecting with an idea they will isolate themselves, which of course is what has motivated Gage's argument from the start: by risking disagreement, we stand to recoup our loss on another level, that of the social production of knowledge.

The strong focus on knowledge that Gage adopts thus threatens to hold students within a temporary state of isolation while they carefully work and rework their thesis-statements. True enough, the consideration a student gives to her opponent's position overcomes some of the effects of that isolation—but only certain intellectual effects. The fact that argumentative activity has been cut off from that which differentiates us—especially from our histories, our cultures, our various positions of power within institutions and social practices—all serves to decrease the chance that our students will feel or find new connections with those affected by an issue, especially with those whose "interests" are not readily observable within the issue as it has been divided up and handed to us historically. The possibility that traditional argumentation, even reconfigured as a rhetoric of inquiry, might still isolate students more than it connects them is finally what led Lester Faigley, in part, to explore the potential of networked classrooms—in spite of or perhaps because of their admitted messiness: "while electronic discourse explodes the belief in a stable, unified self, it offers a means of exploring how identity is multiply constructed and how agency resides in the power of connecting with others and building alliances" (199). We believe that argumentation can and should be approached in a manner that will allow this form of agency to emerge in the classroom, rather than be constrained by a particular epistemological model.

The risk Jarratt's students face is similar to the one Gage anticipates, though it is tinged with a much stronger sense of loss or threat. She also asks her students to accept the risk of encountering disagreement, to risk a public display of difference, but she anticipates much more in such a risk—much more struggle, tension, confusion, anger, embarrassment, condescension, reprisal, intractability. When Jarratt calls for a renewed commitment to "serious and rigorous critical exchange" between students, and also between teachers and students, we sense that her aim is not just to get her students to reconsider a few beliefs or opinions. Her aim is to position students in a manner that will challenge who they are—positions they might enjoy or suffer. The risk of not being connected with others, of

learning that others disagree with you, thus becomes intensified for Jarratt's students, increasing the likelihood that disagreement will turn into direct challenge.

Because we are sympathetic to Jarratt's concerns—especially regarding the "unequal positioning" some people enjoy over others when arguing within institutional settings—we appreciate the urge to intensify the risks her students might experience in her classroom and the desire to make differences and disagreements more real and more risky. From our perspective, though, the risk is not merely that your social position and identity may be challenged, or not merely that someone may disagree with your intellectual position, or not even that you may lose the argument; the risk is also that you may become different than you were before the argument began. Serious argumentation requires a willingness to see things differently and to be changed in and through the dialogic process. As Gage points out, argumentation enables us to reformulate our positions through our interactions with those with whom we are in conflict; as Jarratt emphasizes, those positions are not just intellectual ones but positions of power and identity that come out of real histories.

This kind of change is not easy. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks acknowledges the pain in this process and the consequent need for teachers to show compassion:

> There can be, and usually is, some degree of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches. I respect that pain. And I include recognition of it now when I teach, that is to say, I teach about shifting paradigms and talk about the discomfort it can cause. (43)

Eloise Buker points out that the change we go through in order to understand another person or perspective is "often accomplished only through struggle," and the threat of struggle always carries with it the reflex action of retrenchment, a retreat back into isolation and defended difference. We believe that students will risk such changes only when argumentation is perceived as a social activity through which they, first and foremost, *connect* with others.

We have seen that aspects of the kind of argumentation to which we have been pointing can be found within both Gage's and Jarratt's fully articulated positions: Gage moves us toward an understanding of rhetoric as something that requires us to connect and interact with those with whom we disagree; and Jarratt insists that when we do so we must squarely confront the differences among us. Yet the pressure each puts on argumentation—as the production of knowledge (finding a sharable thesis) or as the last hope in a world of unspeakable injustices—tends to obscure these insights and thus to reduce, rather than to enhance, the chance that students will experience how argument can facilitate our "ability to move

into different positions," generate new relations with others, and thus change both the inner and outer landscapes of our initial disagreements and conflicts.

Our quest to develop a new approach to teaching argumentation began, however, not with these theoretical considerations but rather developed as we together designed courses that tried to instantiate a revised sense of argument as inquiry. The two courses we describe below differ from each other in outline and content, but each course takes as its primary goal to engage students in a kind of writing that moves beyond the "opposing viewpoints," disputatious, display type of argumentation. Both courses avoid, as much as possible, rushing students to defend sides or to decide on a position. Instead, we sought to give students more time to learn and think about the issues they were engaging, with the idea in mind that in the process they will recognize that the positions we take—especially the first, easy positions that we have "accepted"—usually have been socially, culturally, and historically determined and, not coincidentally, usually have unforeseen consequences for others, others whose positions are often not even represented by the manner in which the issues are handed down to us ("pro and con").

At the same time, we wanted students to have the chance to discover that complex issues have the potential to involve us in unexpected alliances through which we can open ourselves to new possibilities and responsibilities. What we are about to offer, we acknowledge, is not so much a specific method of teaching argument that can be followed, step by step, as an approach, or a loose affiliation of approaches. Our discussion is instead meant as a part of an ongoing project we share with others to rethink the role of argument in the writing curriculum, especially as we attempt to answer the demand that our writing courses help prepare students to deal with the real conflicts that face all of us in society today.

What's Wrong with the Washington Redskins?

> What the government did to the Cherokee Indians was cruel and unusual punishment. No one should be forced off their land and then forced to travel hundreds of miles. On top of this one third of their population died along the way. Even though this type of thing would never happen in modern day, we can look back now and critique the action of the government. I feel sorry for the Indians, but if the government had not done this, America would not be what it is today. If Indians still owned most of the United States, America would be a third world country.

The first-year MTU student whose work is excerpted above is not exceptional in his assessment that bad things just happen on the road to

progress. This is the sort of comment that is normal in many courses, at least in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, that deal with issues of American Indian rights or the history of westward expansion. This student was not taking such a course, however. He was in a second term composition course and was asked to write a short response to a passage from *The Education of Little Tree.* That he chose to stake out a position is less interesting to us, in our discussion of argument, than is the sense we have that he feels that there is no real issue at hand. History is history. Bad things happen to good people. Let's get on with our lives. The course we will describe in the next few pages was designed partially in response to that easy way in which first-year students often seem to dismiss the many issues that surround them daily, in the news, in classes, in work situations, even in the most mundane kinds of arenas—like what to name a football team.

In this writing course, which focused on the issue of using Indian mascot names and logos for sports teams, we began working essentially from argument out: we asked students to read and to summarize two extremely opposed positions presented in two articles: "Indians Have Worse Problems," by syndicated columnist Andy Rooney, and "Crimes Against Humanity," by Cherokee activist and critic Ward Churchill. Many students found Rooney's arguments (even such claims as "American Indians were never subjected to the same kind of racial bias that blacks were," or, "While American Indians have a grand past, the impact of their culture on the world has been slight") as reasonable, even persuasive. By contrast, many were offended by Ward Churchill's charge that "the use of native names, images and symbols as sports team mascots and the like is, by definition, a virulently racist practice" (43). But by far, the most consistent response of the class, an honors section, was that the question of Indian mascot names was a non-issue. Several students, for example, wrote that demonstrations over mascot names were publicity stunts from a radical group of Indians who did not represent the majority. Moreover, the class made the charge that this issue was just another example of PC at work. Why should anyone care what a team calls itself?

It seemed to us that this was a good start for the approach to argument we had in mind. The question, "Why should anyone care?" was precisely the kind of question we wanted students to ask—and answer. Yet, at this moment in the course we also had to contend with the fact that our students were oscillating in their relation to the issue, oscillating between disengaging from the issue—calling it PC and a non-issue—and throwing themselves into a heated defense of using Indian mascot names. Clearly Ward Churchill's charges had threatened something very close to them, perhaps their loyalties to school, team, tradition, even national identity. Since team and school mascot names function to unite students' and fans' identities, in effect building both public and private loyalties, the issue of

changing the name of a team can easily become tied to those and other loyalties. Such an issue threatens to polarize students as they take sides and doggedly defend their "camp"—which is precisely the behavior we had hoped to avoid. That attachment to "what is" over a willingness to debate "what might be the implications of" accounts, at least in part, for the sort of positioning we see in the passage above. To that student, America is fine as it is. This is his country. If anything else had happened, we would have some other, some less developed country—a country not his. Loyalty is a complicated bit of the puzzle of human reasoning.

What is more, an issue like the mascot one seems, for many students, to hit at political loyalties. As we noted above, by the second day of this assignment, students were already dismissing its relevance as simply another "PC debate." This turn was perhaps inevitable, for, as Gerald Graff points out, "In literature and the humanities, cultural nationalism has been the main organizing principle since the romantic period, when the doctrine became established that the quality of a nation's language and literature was the touchstone of its greatness as a nation" (151). This kind of loyalty plays itself out easily enough every time we bring cultural studies, cultural critique, or a multicultural agenda to the writing class. Such an agenda threatens nationalism. As Graff reminds us, "The rule seems to be that any politics is suspect except that kind that helped us get where we are, which by definition does not count as politics" (156). Thus, our students' easy initial acceptance of Rooney's column and their discomfort with Churchill's article. They found Rooney abrasive but acceptable and Churchill merely abrasive. (We might add here that both are openly abrasive.)

This is, of course, a paradoxical predicament for a class given over to the study of argumentation. The presumed goal is to critically examine not just one's beliefs but the decisions that are being made in our communities. The more those decisions touch students' loyalties, though, the more likely students are to retrench, not listen to others, resort to quips, and as a result lose sight of the complexity of the issue under consideration. We chose this moment of oscillation, then, to ask the students to write out (in their notebooks) their own position in this debate. Then we asked them to put that position statement away and to start a different kind of work.

At the end of the term, when they did share with their instructor that initial notebook entry, students' own inability to see any issue worth discussing here was clear. The most common reaction was anger: Indians, one student wrote, just "have to have something to cry about." They should, "GROW UP, STOP CRYING, AND GET ON WITH LIFE!" Others echoed that attitude. One admitted that when she thought of Indians, she got a picture of fat, lazy drunkards who live off the government. The class, as whole, certainly gave the impression that they felt those arguing over mascot names were "making a big deal out of nothing." They didn't un-

derstand why anyone could get upset over such a topic. And, they felt that American Indians were simply holding onto a past they no longer had a right to. One student, for example, wrote that he lives in Keweenaw Bay, where one band of Ojibway is located, and he resents the fact that the Indians there can haul "thousands of pounds of lake trout from Keweenaw Bay with motorized boats, instead of canoes and commercially made nets, instead of hand woven ones." A few stated very simply that Indian people ought to assimilate and get it over with. Many agreed with the student who said, during class discussion, that the Indians have lost the big battle, and they have to understand what it means to lose. The instructor, by contrast, was not convinced that her students knew the many consequences of "losing." The class seemed comfortable with the status quo, unwilling to poke around into an argument they wished had never been brought up in the first place.

These vigorously negative stereotypes might surprise a few readers who see more romanticized images as the current media stereotype, especially from such recent popular programs and films as *Northern Exposure, Dr. Quinn: Medicine Woman, Pocahontas, Dances with Wolves,* and *The Last of the Mohicans,* to name a few. Jeffery Hanson and Linda Rouse explain this kind of contradictory stereotyping of American Indians as common. They discovered that, although the students they studied reported that most of the information they have about American Indians came from the media, the stereotype they eventually formed depended on where they were living. If they lived in areas where American Indians were not a visible minority and were not competing for resources, the stereotype tended to be overwhelmingly positive and romanticized. If they lived in a region (such as South Dakota, Wisconsin, or Minnesota), where Indian people did constitute a visible minority and might compete for resources, the stereotypes were severely negative. Our students' responses to this issue are typical of the kinds of responses Rouse and Hanson discovered among students living in this part of the country.

For this section of the term, then, the class sometimes angrily argued that we had entered into a silly, even meaningless debate. They claimed no interest in and, several of them, no knowledge of the ways each side might argue their position. And, yet, when asked to list arguments from both sides of the discussion, students found it much easier to outline the position represented by Rooney than that represented by Churchill. For the instructor, that meant that either Rooney's position was the position most available in the popular press, or that students' own loyalties or stereotypes were interfering with their ability to understand other positions.

The next step in this assignment, then, was to begin investigating the many issues, questions, and concerns that surround the arguments set

forth in Rooney's and Churchill's articles. In an attempt to get students beyond polarized debate, we asked them not to look for more arguments for or against using Indian mascot names. Instead, we wanted them to ask different questions—questions that would direct their attention more broadly to the people involved in the discussion, what matters to those people, and how the debate got to the Rooney-Churchill level. Then we asked them to start looking for some possible answers to these questions: Why would anyone argue over something as seemingly harmless as a name? Why does anyone think it is an issue at all? Obviously, it wasn't just an issue with Indian people, or Andy Rooney, the Cleveland Indian fans, and others would not be so resolute in their determination to keep what they considered theirs. The argument came from somewhere, and it was about something more than naming teams. Where did it come from? What was it about? Our first strategy, then, was to ask students to question the concepts they were using (the significance of naming), to situate the issue historically (how did the problem develop?), and to find analogous problems from the past in order to resist coming to closure too quickly.

For the next six weeks, the students did research that might have seemed far afield of the initial argument. Goaded by Rooney's assertion that American Indians had contributed little to contemporary culture, they learned and wrote about separate Indian cultures. In response to Churchill's question of why it seems so much easier these days to use Indian names in ways we would not use other group names, they did research on reservation schools and acculturation—along the way learning what Richard Henry Pratt meant when he declared it a necessity that "[t]he Indian must die as an Indian in order to live as a man." During this part of the course, several students did work on stereotyping and its effects. As a result, one student compared the arguments over Indian mascot names and symbols to arguments in the sixties and seventies when a number of African American stereotyped product names and logos were changed. Another student ran across articles detailing the controversy over Crazy Horse Malt Liquor and was prompted by that controversy to learn more about Crazy Horse. He had heard the name all his life and knew nothing of the man. The student who shouted in all caps to Indian people to GROW UP! found there was much more to get over than he had anticipated. After watching *In the White Man's Image*, this student wrote,

> After watching the tape on the Indian school, I was shocked when I heard an Indian voice say that after the school, they wanted to be good and live in wood houses and settle down. They taught the Indians that their old ways were bad. I think this is horrible. It helps to destroy the heritage of the Indians.

In his paper, he acknowledged the truth that most team supporters quite honestly do not intend to demean Indian people with mascot names, but he pointed out that the intention is not necessarily the effect. He quoted Indian activist and songwriter John Trudell who told the class, "There are a million ways to put a people down and using their names and rituals is just one way." What this student did, then, was to try to understand why some people might defend the status quo while others see it as "a virulently racist practice" (Churchill).

At the end of the term, students wrote about the experience of using argument as a tool of intellectual inquiry. In portfolio cover letters, most said they had not really changed their initial position on the argument (though now most simply said that if a name offends the group named, it ought to be dropped), and they still thought the argument was a trivial one. What had changed, however, was why they thought it trivial. In the process of questioning the issue—what matters? why does naming seem both so serious and so trivial?—they felt they had discovered other, more significant (historically and culturally informed) issues within this one. They weren't ready to give either Andy Rooney or Ward Churchill the nod in terms of who they thought had "won" this debate, but they did see something much more profound embedded within the terms of the debate. One student wrote that, far from learning to keep his opinion to himself (as he had been taught to do in high school), this work had taught him that he had to more carefully understand his position and its consequences. He wrote, "[t]he research I did for essay 3 made me want to run and tell the world how I felt about the mascot issue. So I did. I was rewarded when upon reading my paper in front of the class, everyone seemed interested in it." This was the student who had done his work on Crazy Horse.

We should add that these students did not feel compelled to take the Indians' side in this debate, either. Despite fears expressed by some that introducing political dispute into the classroom is a way of forcing students to accept the instructor's politics, our experience has been that such acceptance is neither easy nor likely. For example, in this course, one student who began the class angrily declaring that Indians had to accept the fact that they were the ones who lost, wrote,

> I feel I have succeeded in showing that one of the reasons that this topic is an issue is that the American mainstream and the Indians are two separate cultures. The two most important things that I have learned from this course [are] that it is all right to think for yourself and form educated opinions... [and] that you have to look at every issue from many different perspectives.

He remained steadfast in his belief that the only way for this issue to be resolved would be for Indian people to accept assimilation as a goal (a position that certainly did not reflect the instructor's politics), but he no longer thought of assimilation as an easy or natural consequence of having lost the big battle. He had, in other words, uncoupled his conclusion that Indians must accept assimilation from the myth of the big battle and reconnected it to his emerging thoughts about culture and cultural conflicts. What he makes of that achievement may well take years to fully realize.

It is true that what these students ended up writing might look less like argument, as we have come to know it, and more (depending on the student's choice of topic) like analysis. And, yet, the course does not avoid argument, either. The kind of assignment we have been describing acknowledges the flat debate then leaves it alone. At the same time, the assignment leads students to an understanding that a more complex argument might be made possible through ongoing inquiry. Too many classroom strategies, too many textbooks, insist that students learn to take hold of and argue a position long before they understand the dimensions of a given issue. We would much rather our students learn to resist doggedly defending their position too soon in the discussion. That is not to suggest that students do not hold positions very early in this process. Certainly, they do, and they most likely want to defend and keep intact those positions. We won't deny that. For the students in this class, however, their initial position statements were never used during whole-class discussion. Those early statements remained theirs to do with as they pleased. Primarily, students seemed to use them as a starting point for their research or as a way to identify questions within the broader topic of the course. As their instructors, we were more interested (and we believe the class was, too) in what students learned about the issues surrounding this debate than which side they initially took in it. Moreover, we were interested in helping students realize the complications imbedded in discussions on even seemingly uncomplicated issues like what to name a football team.

A River Runs Through It

> Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters.
>
> —Norman MacLean, *A River Runs Through It* (113)

Generally speaking, water is not a topic people in the upper midwest spend a lot of time thinking about, much less arguing about. Except in bad winters when water mains freeze, we don't worry much about where our water is coming from and whether we will have enough. So, when we announced to a first-year writing class that the topic we would be focusing on for the quarter was water resources, they were distinctly nonplused. But a few weeks into the course, many of them wrote comments like the following:

> Before entering HU 101, water resources rated just as high as the Royal Family on my list of importance. Now, after reading a few articles on the subject, I think about it quite often. What amazes me most about water resource management is its complexity.

Like the rivers of North America, the issue of water resources flows through a complex array of political positions and priorities in our society. From the James Bay hydroelectric project in Quebec to the California aqueduct, from the draining of the Everglades to proposals for a pipeline to pump Alaskan water to Texas, the questions of who owns the water in North America and how it should be used are the concern of agribusiness, golfers, small farmers, white-water rafters, mining companies, American Indians, fishermen, electrical companies, environmentalists, and urban residents, among others, and the conflicting demands of these interests result in strange and shifting alliances among groups who are often opposed on other issues. In arguing in this arena, students find it hard to locate preconstructed positions they can accept and argue for. Instead, they must sort through and negotiate competing concerns in order to construct a position they feel is justified and they want to defend.

Of course, any issue, including water resources, can be cast in the point-counterpoint argument mode: America's Rivers—Should we dam them for power or let them run free? When differences of opinion are polarized and sensationalized in this way, the emphasis in argument shifts from the issue to the skills and personalities of the combatants and the formal structures of argumentation. And while these are always a part of argument, and contribute a lot to the enjoyment some people find in argument, focusing on stark controversies at the expense of the complexities of an issue is also a way of evading or covering up the painful and complex problems that face us and that we must resolve if we want to have a society that's worth living in. We wanted to show students that arguments do matter, that the positions they take matter to them in their daily lives, and that argument serves a useful function in society, the function of helping us all make better decisions, together. We called the kind of writing they would be doing deliberative discourse, not to take the focus

off the differences that lead to disputation but to emphasize that such differences are legitimate and deeply felt and must be talked about in a serious way.

We were again, in this course, concerned to not push students prematurely into taking a position on issues they knew little about and thus cared little about. Certainly, the aim of argument is to influence specific decisions in a specific context, to recommend a particular course of action, and certainly it is the pressure imposed by the need for specific decisions—should we enact NAFTA? should we raise the sales tax or the income tax to finance public schools?—that sometimes leads us to simplify what we know are complicated issues and to wrangle over them heatedly. But this is only one moment in the activity of arguing, and in many ways the end of argument. To see this moment as the whole of argumentative writing is to risk seeing all decisions as final, all positions as absolute or even natural, to see argument, paradoxically, as somehow antithetical to change.

It takes time to learn about an issue, to learn what you really think about it and how it affects your life and the lives of others. On the first day, we talked about all the ways water was important to us: in raising crops and in otherwise providing us with food; in mining resources; in manufacturing products; in disposing of waste; in transporting people and products; in providing electrical power; in providing habitats for other species, recreational opportunities, and spiritual relaxation; and in simply sustaining our lives. We then handed out the assignments for the course. We asked them to write four related papers in which they were to construct a position they believed in on a specific issue of their choice involving water resources. The assignments were designed to give students a chance to reflect on their ideas and arguments as they wrote and read and discussed and rewrote; in essence, the first three papers were simply drafts, albeit "good" drafts, steps in the process of developing a carefully considered argument for a carefully constructed position in the fourth and final paper.

The first assignment asked them simply to explore the general issue of water resources and their reactions to it, to find what aspects of this issue interested them. Some of the questions we asked them to think about in this paper were: What aspects of this issue relate to your interests and plans and how do they relate? What experiences have you had that shape how you feel about this issue? What aspects of the issue do you find interesting at this point and why? What surprised you in what we have read and discussed? What else would you like to find out about this issue? The purpose here was for them to find some way to connect to the issue, whether intellectually, experientially, or emotionally.

Many of our midwestern students who personally experienced the decline of farming in this region were struck by one of Marc Reisner's con-

clusions in *Cadillac Desert:* "In a West that once and for all made sense, you might import a lot more meat and dairy products from states where they are raised on rain, rather than dream of importing those states' rain" (517). One student who grew up on a farm in Michigan explained that his stepfather had committed suicide when the price of milk declined and he couldn't repay his bank loans. His experience clearly affected how he responded to much of the material we looked at in the course: he was especially sympathetic to the plight of the long-term small rancher in Nevada who lost his water to the newly irrigated large farms down the valley, to the situation of the olive farmer in California who was put out of business by Prudential Insurance's cornering the market with their five-thousand acre farm near Bakersfield, and to the Hispanic farmers in *The Milagro Beanfield War* in their fight against the developers.

Other students found less heart-rending personal connections to the issues involving water. A student who lived on a lake investigated the state laws that allowed the owner of the water rights of the lake to manipulate the water level to maximize the hydroelectric power his dam could produce. A student with a passion for golf looked into water conserving designs for the abundant golf courses in western deserts. Some students were simply moved by a question of fairness: several wrote about the treatment of the Cree Indians by the developers of the James Bay hydroelectric project. And others were interested in the technological problems involved, like the students who wrote about new methods of irrigation and power generation. The students' level of commitment to the issue—and then to the position they constructed—thus varied in strength and nature, but all understood that deliberative discourse required some kind of commitment on their part.

The second assignment asked students to begin to stake out a position they found persuasive on a specific issue, although we cautioned them to discuss *all* the positions that they found persuasive and to explain how these positions might conflict with one another and how these conflicts might be resolved. We also emphasized, both in the instructions and in comments on their drafts, that this paper was only the beginning of the process of constructing a position, that they would next need to look at the position they had stated and think about such things as whether it really represented what they believed in, what sort of actions would follow from this position, whether they really found these actions to be possible and desirable, and what questions their position raised that they would need to investigate further.

When one student, a very skilled writer, handed in the first draft of this second paper, he told the instructor he had the outline of his final paper, and all he would have to do in the rest of the course was to add in a little

more information from the library. He had formulated a logical problem-solution argument: since irrigated farming in the west made no economic sense, the government should buy out western agricultural concerns and subsidize the development of more agriculture in the midwest and east. When we suggested that there were a couple of serious problems with his solution, namely that the federal government most assuredly did not have the money in these times of national debt to finance such a plan, and that people who had lived and farmed in the west for generations might not appreciate having their livelihoods eliminated in this way, he said that he was ignoring these aspects of the situation for the purposes of his argument. We said that a solution that wouldn't work isn't a solution at all, that there was more to taking a position than constructing a clear thesis and a logically argued paper.

He seemed somewhat taken aback; clearly, this strategy of quickly taking stock of the issue and offering a novel and definitive solution had worked well for him in past writing courses. We pressed our questions because we wanted to push him (and the other students) beyond the form of argument that ignores real conflicts by turning them into abstract problems to be solved or managed. In his second draft of the second paper and in the third paper, he analyzed the complexities of the situation more thoroughly. He discovered that financial incentives for more efficient use of water by farmers could and were being paid for by urban water users in the west rather than the federal government. He discovered that zoning, the establishment of agricultural districts, and cluster residential development were possible solutions to the increasing pressure of development that drives up the property values of agricultural land beyond the levels where farming is economically feasible in the midwest.

The third assignment asked students to reconsider their initial positions from the point of view of someone who would not agree with them. We told students that the reason to look at opposing positions when constructing an argument was not so much to anticipate and counter objections as it was to learn more about the issue and thus to make your own position more reasonable and practical, to take into account not only your own interests and desires and experiences but also those of others.

We had a chance to make this point clearer one day in another class that was similarly structured but focused on a different topic. A female student stated unequivocally that it was essential that one parent in a family not work so that someone would be home when the kids got back from school; a male student countered that both his parents worked and that he had not suffered at all from coming home to an empty house. The two debated this issue rather heatedly for about five minutes with the rest of the class throwing in encouraging comments or reactions. She argued that she

would have felt insecure and unloved in his position; he countered that he developed a strong sense of independence and still felt close to his parents because of the time they did find to spend together. When he finally said it was clear he couldn't win this argument because she always had something to say in response, we instead asked the class to look at what had happened differently, not as simply an argument to be won or lost but as an opportunity to learn about different perspectives—to learn that your experiences and needs are not necessarily the same as those of others and that there are benefits and drawbacks to the differing decisions made by parents.

In composing this third assignment we reminded ourselves that the risk in argument is not that you may lose but rather that you may change. We asked them to think about the concerns of someone who held a position that they did not find to be persuasive and explain why someone might hold this position. Then we asked them to discuss what they might learn from this position: What beliefs and feelings did they find they could sympathize with, even if they did not agree with them? What experiences did they learn about that might help them see new aspects of the issue? How did some of the concerns expressed relate to some of their concerns? We asked these questions knowing full well that our students were in the midst of working and reworking their relations to the world around them and that our questions might contribute to that work by asking them to connect with others' concerns and needs. We also knew full well the rhetorical force of the questions we asked; thoughtfully pursued, these questions could and did prompt changes in our students.

The student who was so concerned with the plight of small farmers began his writing by adamantly opposing corporate farming, but he really did not know why he opposed corporate farming—except that it put small traditional farmers out of business and he thought that this was unfair. In the course of his work on his papers, he came across a statement by René Dubos in an essay by Edward Abbey ("farming as a way of life is a self-sustaining, symbiotic relationship between man and earth") that gave him a way of talking about the difference in attitude toward the land and toward their work he felt between traditional small farmers and corporate agribusinesses. But at the same time, he developed an understanding of the place of corporate farming in the economic system of the country. In a statement he wrote at the end of the course, he explained:

> My position on the topic of water at first was corporate farms are no good and we shut them down completely. As we read articles and wrote papers I slowly learned how complex our economic system is. I didn't realize all the jobs that would be lost and how it would affect California's economic system.

> Also I finally realized the fact that corporate farms just didn't appear out of nowhere. They developed over time. . . . The corporate farms that should be kept after and be taxed super high are conglomerates like Prudential, [which] would possibly force them to sell their land to people who care and respect the land and soil. These are the corporate farms that don't care for the land and if the land becomes worthless they just buy land somewhere else and they say "oh well we lost a couple of acres of land we can just write it off as a loss." I guess I'm still against corporate farms but mostly only them being owned by conglomerates.

The student who lived on a lake came to sympathize with the owner of the water rights' desire to make a living through the sale of hydroelectric power, and he connected this situation to that of a western water dispute between a rancher and alfalfa farmers. Instead of recommending government regulation, as he had started out doing, he argued instead that people need to learn to work together so that all can make a living and be satisfied that their water is being used efficiently.

The last assignment asked students to pull together all that they had learned from writing and rewriting the first three papers, from their readings, and from our work in class. By then they had all learned a lot—and so had we—not only about the specific issue they had been researching and analyzing, but also about different attitudes toward water issues in general and different concerns that needed to be taken into account. They had lots of their own writing to read over and reflect on, to revise and reuse. They had, in short, a good place from which to begin constructing a thoughtful and informed argument. Constructing a position, we told them, means sorting through for yourself the various questions and problems and values involved in an issue and coming to a decision you can stand up for.

What this sequence of assignments allowed students to do, then, was to take some time with a single issue, to really think about it, to investigate what was involved, to respond to it in more than one way, to make assertions about it and then reconsider those assertions, to risk changing how they thought about the things that mattered to them and what they might do in the future. And students did, for the most part, change their thinking about the issues they dealt with, although, as with the students in the course discussing mascot names, they did not simply shift sides or take on the instructor's position. Despite a great deal of skepticism expressed by the instructor, the golf aficionado still argued that the desert was a good place to situate golf courses, as long as they were correctly designed. The student who first proposed that western agriculture be abandoned still argued in his final paper that we must reverse the trend toward dependence on western agriculture, but the solution he offered was much more com-

plex—and much more realistic. In a statement about his paper, he observed, "I initially thought that farming in the desert was completely ludicrous and had no place in crop production. I've since learned that, if done correctly, irrigating farming can be a part of American farming for a long time." In his paper, he argued that "irrigating farmers in the American southwest are going to have to adapt to their regions pending water shortages," and that "planned rural developments" in the midwest "are needed to ensure that these lands remain available for farming." Almost all of the students in this class arrived at extremely complex positions, often so complex that they had to struggle hard to express them in any coherent way. But also, more importantly, students developed positions that mattered to them and that dealt with real world problems in a realistic way.

Pushing students to develop positions that take into account the complexities of real world issues not only moves argumentative writing into a more serious realm, away from display or eristic debate, it also gives them a sense of how their academic work can connect with and help them understand their everyday lives. One of the number of students who wrote about the impact of the James Bay hydroelectric project on the lifestyle of the Cree Indians attended a local round table discussion about sustainable development as part of her preparation for writing her final paper. What she learned there was more than just support for her position: "When I went to the Round Table Meeting on Monday night my thoughts about this paper strengthened even more. My feelings were really true, they weren't made up by reading about the subject in magazine articles."

Asking students to research issues and to learn from people they disagree with does not prevent them from taking strong positions, though it does result in positions that are more reasonable and thoughtful. Their work is a form of collaborative inquiry, but it is still argument, too, in that it negotiates serious differences and recommends a course of action. We also found that bringing conflicts into the classroom does not necessarily mean turning the classroom into a site of conflict. When students are aware that the differences of opinion between them exist in a broader arena—that these differences are not just their own opinions but arise from historical, social, and cultural conditions—they do not feel they need to argue so fiercely and single-mindedly, and they can take the time to listen to other voices and rethink their positions.

By Way of a Conclusion

Perhaps the most frustrating, though not surprising, thing we learned from our two courses was that the very things we set out to resist—two-

sided issues, the rush to assert a thesis, and the concentration on forms—returned again and again, if we were not careful. Just as so many argument readers tell students that pro-and-con arguments are too facile and yet go on to organize their chapters in terms of pro-and-con (or speak in ways that assume students "want to take a side"), we found ourselves worrying whether our students' "positions" were clear enough, or whether they had a controversial enough "thesis." Even our examples betray the obvious, namely, that once you ask students to write through their interest in an issue, the assumption becomes that they will have a position that stands against, is differentiated from, someone else's position. And it is easier to grasp one's position, think it through, and present it to others if it is conceived in terms of an opposition.

We thus saw (and tried to understand) the forces that drove us and our students to simplify and to formalize the argumentative situation, and this is why, in the first course, we were not concerned that the papers we received did not all look argumentative. We understood that the initial disagreement (between Rooney and Churchill) would contextualize, for them and for their readers, their effort to answer questions that seemed only tangentially related to the disagreement. Their research did not preclude argument; it was infused with the initial sense of argument, and, what is most important, their answers served to modify the initial simplicity of the disagreement.

In the second class on water resources, similar doubts arose. Although we asked students to articulate their "positions," the decision to see their positions as solutions to problems, together with the scrutiny given the solutions offered (and together with the relatively "untopical" nature of the issue), encouraged students to reconfigure the conflicts, to bring in other perspectives, other complications, which then served to decenter the original disagreement in a fresh (and more complex) direction. Thus, in one case the issue shifted from "irrigated farming in the western states: yes or no?" to "how can we tilt the balance of farming back to the midwestern states (which have a natural supply of water) in a manner that increases the efficiency of western farming and discourages the selling off of good farm land to developers in the midwest?"

In our approach to argument, we share concerns with both cooperative and neosophistic rhetorics. Although we too want to teach the conflicts, at the same time we do not want to turn the classroom into the place where conflicts between students or between students and teachers erupt—not because we are reticent to allow emotion or turmoil into our classrooms, and not because we think all classrooms should be nurturing, but because we suspect, for now at any rate, that the desire to see results in the form of "critical action," when pressed too single-mindedly, may backfire and

reduce a much needed understanding of the complexity of those conflicts. Wanting to have something to say and (desperately) needing to have something to say in self-defense can be productive under certain circumstances. But when arguments are entered into hastily, the complexity of the issues is often lost, and with it (we might add) the basis for introducing important, higher level concepts such as ideology, multiple subjectivity, and contingent foundations.

Neither do we wish to ignore or banish the different experiences and commitments that students bring with them into the classroom, for the expression and investigation of these differences is crucial to understanding the complexities of the problems we want to do something about. Conflicts have histories and are imbedded in more or less permanent power structures; decisions affect different people differently and have consequences that go beyond immediate situations; differences are rarely (if ever) brought permanently into consensus. What is important, to our minds, in teaching students to deal with conflict is that they experience the process of constructing a complex, historically knowledgeable position in light of what matters to, and what will result for, those affected by the positions taken.

If we believe that the writing classroom is a place to engage in serious intellectual inquiry and debate about the questions that trouble our everyday lives, we need to think again about our approach to argument. We need to see argumentation as a crucial social responsibility—an activity that requires us to position ourselves within complicated and interconnected issues. We need to see it as a complex and often extended human activity, or, rather, as an array of human activities, including institutionalized formal debate, legal trials, shouting matches that threaten to end in fist fights, conversational games of one-upsmanship, disagreements among friends, and extended deliberations within a community over what course of action to pursue. We need to see it not just as a matter of winning or losing but as a way to connect with others which may lead to change, not only in the world but also in ourselves. But, most of all, we need to see it as a means of coming to decisions, a way of getting things done in the world, that includes moments of agonistic dispute, moments of inquiry, moments of confrontation, and moments of cooperation.

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