

**Notes from "Talking About Teaching" session: *Argument and Evidence***  
**March 25, 2009**

*Note: The comments here are meant to capture key points of discussion and presentation plus the general tenor of the exchanges.*

**Discussants: Christoph Cox, Jill Lewis, Laura Sizer.**

Charlene opened the workshop with reference to the recent visit of Sam Wineburg and his interest in assumptions made by students and faculty when reading original source material. She encouraged faculty to visit the CTL website and read some of his writings.

Can we apply institutional research on teaching and learning to our teaching at Hampshire? Using data from the Hampshire Institutional Research work, the following were noted:

- Our first year students report that many assignments ask them to integrate, synthesize and evaluate information and arguments.
- 69% say they often/very often are asked to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of arguments
- But, on the CAAP (Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency) Critical Thinking test, only about 20% of scores increased over the first year - and about 33% declined
- Why? It is hard to know.
  - About 40% said they spend less than 10 hrs a week on academic work
  - Maybe our students do not take the test seriously at end of their first year

**Christoph Cox**

Christoph spoke about Guidelines for Humanistic writing and distributed his handout on this (see CTL website). He explained that a key aim for these essays is for students to engage in argument and interpretation, not simply to submit "response papers". Engaging critically with texts is valuable, in part, because it helps students know the text in greater detail. It serves the purpose of explication AND the purpose of getting them to think on their own. Christoph notes that he tries to get students to distinguish between *opinions* (which are private, not available for discussion or disagreement) and *arguments* (which are public, open for inspection and disagreement).

Evidence comes in many forms: textual evidence (words on a page), empirical discoveries, visual elements in a painting or sculpture, sonic elements in a piece of music, etc. Christoph said that he sometimes uses the analogy of the lawyer, telling students that it's their job to convince their readers and to do so via evidence and argument. In a course called "Philosophy, Relativism, and Truth," he organizes three debates (around the three general rubrics of the course: 1) truth and knowledge, 2) ethics, and 3) esthetics). He often assigns students to defend positions they don't hold in order to get them more fully to appreciate the opposing position. Students are judged on how well they present their case - not if they believe it. They come to appreciate an alternative point of view.

### Jill Lewis

The “Argument and Evidence” topic was an especially challenging one for Jill and she put a good deal of thought towards preparing for the discussion. Jill usually teaches two courses: 1) “Living for Tomorrow” (a literature and film course with emphasis on gender and specifically focused on the HIV dilemma) and 2) “Disturbing Desire: Proust, Woolf, Lacan” (with Annie Rogers) which concerns the unconscious, creativity and real change. Both are based on active learning and students are very participative. They gain understanding by doing. These courses can be quite risky for students. Thus the focus on “argument and evidence” is really not the right fit for Jill.

The kinds of questions Jill poses include: How does one produce knowledge? How do we build on our insights? How do we become part of the solution? However, she noted that here is a creative relationship between the analytic process and active creativity,

### Laura Sizer

Laura started by emphasizing that helping students think critically and write well-organized papers is something that all Hampshire faculty strive to achieve. In her classes Laura focuses on helping students understand the role of argument and evidence and develop the ability to present arguments: state a thesis and defend it with evidence.

In her classes students are helped to think critically through class discussions and through writing argument papers. The challenge is to help students get into a mindset of thinking critically in a careful way – to both understand and respond to the positions of others in ways that are thoughtful and respectful.

This is hard for them to do! Students are often reluctant to state a strong position, or to disagree with the positions taken by others. Laura said that is not fully clear why this is the case.

- Perhaps they arrive from high school having experienced an emphasis on tolerance and multiple perspectives, so argument (even in the technical sense) and disagreement are perceived as impolite or things to be avoided.
- Many students are at a developmental stage in their thinking that is marked by a strong relativism. They have come to learn that there are multiple viewpoints on issues, that opinions differ, and this has led them to think that everything is relative, up for question, uncertain; that there is no knowledge, only opinion. If everything is (mere) opinion, then there is no point in interrogating the grounds or warrant for ideas.

It is helpful to keep in mind that making strong claims, and challenging (respectfully) the claims of others is not something that comes naturally or easily to many students. It is important to make them feel comfortable with that, and to help them understand the importance and role of argument and evidence. Early on in the semester she and her students spend time talking about why argument and evidence are important to the task of

learning and understanding ideas – one’s own, as well as those of others. The flip side of course, is teaching students how to do all this appropriately and with respect.

In many of her introductory level classes Laura asks students to come up with guidelines for discussion in the classroom. Students are asked to pledge to uphold these guidelines within their class community. Some of these principles include:

- Respond to ideas not the person holding the ideas
- Play devil’s advocate in order to test your own ideas, and assume that your other classmates may be doing the same.

Also, early on Laura has an exercise to help the students get to know each other. That way the class begins to build a bit of community so that these discussions are happening within a framework.

The writing assignments build on each other. These are geared towards helping students pick out and articulate a clear and informative thesis and also to understand the structure of the argument that the author is offering – what reasons the author gives in support of the position they hold and ways to think critically about that position.

Using a peer review guide, students evaluate one another’s papers. The evaluative comments Laura gives on the papers are organized by a similar rubric.

In her introductory classes Laura breaks early assignments down in to manageable chunks.

- Write a purely exegetical paper: explain the author’s argument, or perhaps 2 authors that disagree on an issue
- Write an argument paper that presents and defends the student’s position on the issue.
- Then put the pieces together and REWRITE.

It is often useful to put someone else’s argument into your own words; to write about what a person says and what the evidence is to support this. Students have to learn that there are different kinds of evidence.

(Laura’s handout on “Writing for philosophy classes,” as well as her peer review guide and paper evaluation rubric, are on the CTL webpage under Resources/student handouts/course related.)

Lynn Miller spoke of his requirement that students write at least three drafts of a paper. The first draft is due within three weeks of the beginning of class and needs to include all the main references the student expects to use. He heavily edits this first draft in red pen and posts it on the wall, indicating that he is ready to discuss the paper in depth with the student in his office. He believes that this technique forces students to take the assignment very seriously and to accept critical analysis early on.

Laura Wenk referred to Sam Wineburg’s visit and explained how students are novices compared to historians. Wineburg’s “think aloud while reading” protocol has helped faculty understand what students are missing in their encounters with the material. Students take the text at face value and don’t see the missing pieces.

Tom Haxo said that students have to have discussions with themselves. He referred to Adrian Piper's "ten principles for good writing"  
(<http://docs.google.com/gview?a=v&q=cache:2gMzj8ehOTEJ:www.adrianpiper.com/docs/10CommsPhilWriting.pdf+Adrian+Piper+ten+principles+for+clear+writing&hl=en&gl=us>)

Joanna Morris said that students are resistant to ground rules –sometimes they seem to be against empirical evidence. What inferences can be made about this? At times they refuse to go with underlying assumptions.

History is opinion, students think. (Laura)

Relativist position is inconsistent, students think. (Christoph)

Christoph said sometimes it is important to call students on their "commitment to social justice" – that all positions are relative.