

A case study of argumentation at undergraduate level in History

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Abstract

This article examines two essays by undergraduate students in the first year of study in History at a university in the UK. It also draws on documentary evidence from the department in question and interviews with the students themselves to paint a picture of the way argumentation operates at this level. While no firm conclusions can be drawn, the evidence suggests a department with a high degree of awareness of the importance of argument and argumentation in studying History; and students who are aware and articulate about the problem facing them in constructing essays in the discipline. Suggestions are made about induction into the epistemological and argumentative demands of undergraduate study.

Keywords

Argumentation, history, undergraduate, essay, interview, documents

Introduction

Argumentation at undergraduate level continues to be under-researched in the UK, despite some recent studies (Andrews 2002, 2009; Mitchell et al. 2008; Torgerson et al. 2006). There has been no major study on the topic, reflecting perhaps a lack of interest or concern in the ability of undergraduate students to compose argumentatively, despite increasing numbers of students coming into full-time higher education during the period. While there has been a slow but steady rise in interest in writing across the disciplines, argumentation research at this level remains small-scale. This dearth of research may be due to a sense that argument is 'too high' a term to do justice to the wide range of writing genres that are required of undergraduate students across a range of disciplines; and/or to research that *has* been carried out, but under the name of 'essays' or the more broadly conceived 'expositional' category. The present article revisits some hitherto unanalysed data from a pilot study of argumentation in undergraduate History (see Andrews et al. 2006). It draws particularly on documentary evidence from the department about argumentation; two essays by undergraduates; and interviews with the students.

Documentary evidence from the department in question

The particular History department in which the study took place had a rich set of documents for students, both on the web and in printed form. Collectively, these documents give a strong

sense of induction into a discipline, and mark a significant change from study at pre-university level (where the ‘subject’ rather than the discipline encourages historical thinking, but not to the same intensity or degree). The documents include, in printed format, *A Guide to Your First Year [at x University]*, *Studying History*, a general *Undergraduate Handbook* and a *Dissertation Booklet*. The latter is not of high relevance to the present article as it concerns work that students undertake in the last year of the three-year degree course; but because argumentation is so central to the dissertation, and the 10,000 word dissertation is seen as the end point of the course (it carries the highest proportion of marks of any of the assignments) some reference is made to it. The other documents are worth analysing, however, not only for how they address argumentation, but in how *History as a discipline* is introduced to students. Such an epistemological dimension is important to the present article as the distinctive approach of each discipline is likely to have considerable bearing on the way argument is framed and practised.

One of the aims of this particular History course is “to show you how to interpret the past”ⁱ. The statement of aims goes on:

Because of the limitations upon what may be known, history is a matter for interpretation and debate. You will be encouraged to read (and listen) critically... You will have to formulate your own views and to substantiate them with evidence and argument.

The course moves from broad historical and historiographical topics in the first year to more narrowly focussed period modules in the second year. In the last year there is a return to methodological questions via a module called ‘Issues in historical thought’, a module on comparative studies, and the dissertation. The trajectory of the course as a whole is toward increasing criticality, awareness of controversies in History, and via the process of drilling down at the points of dispute through tertiary, secondary and primary sources to the epistemological sub-strata.

Argument permeates the course and its teaching methods (seminars, lectures, tutorials, discussion groups and collaborative projects) as argumentation is seen to be central to the discipline of History. Two examples of the ubiquity of argument are in the statements “lectures, like books and articles, have arguments to present and you should think equally critically about them” or, as far as one-to-one tutorials are concerned, “you should be engaging both with the substantive historical issues, and with problems of constructing and expressing historical arguments. You should be learning to read critically, to plan your essays, and to develop your arguments”. As far as assessment is concerned, the emphasis on argument is maintained. The key dividing line regarding argument is between what is called in the UK an ‘upper-second class’ and a ‘lower-second class’ mark. On a six-point scale from a ‘first’ (the highest mark) to a ‘fail’, the dividing line is between the second and third points on the scale. At the upper-second’ level, “work shows an ability to write well-informed essays developing a clear and relevant argument and showing good historical understanding”. At the ‘lower-second’ level, “work is sound, well-informed and shows a basic understanding of the subject, but essays lack analytical depth and the argument is undeveloped or weakly directed”. This dividing line between ‘clear and relevant argument’ on the one hand and ‘undeveloped or weakly directed argument’ on the other marks a line between a very good, generally accepted standard of academic performance that will enable a student to go on to Masters, research study or higher-valued professional pathway in the former case – and to a

good but more ‘middling’ performance in the latter case which will not (in general) qualify a student to go on to further academic study. Students at the ‘lower-second level’ are generally understood to be able to handle exposition well, but not to be able to *argue* coherently, contrapuntally, originally and with the support of appropriate evidence.

Interestingly, as far as History in this particular department goes, argumentation is seen as central to the discipline and therefore not part of generic study skills. Argumentation is part of the weave and weft of studying History (“it’s the discipline” is what one of the lecturers declared) and so graduates in History would be expected to be good arguers, to be able to marshal evidence, to understand controversies, and to be able to develop clear and strong arguments. History in this department does see ‘thinking critically and analytically’ as a generic study skill, but does not link it explicitly to argumentation. Other disciplines, for which argument is not seen as central, may see argumentation as part of generic study skills – something based in the articulation and expression of ideas in verbal language, but essentially peripheral to the substantive part of the discipline.

What is extraordinary about the documentation of the department in question is its publication *Studying History*. This document is epistemological in its focus on the nature of History; and pedagogical in its consideration of how the didactics of the discipline relate to its teaching and learning techniques. It is thus an in-depth look at how to study History, rather than a guide to ‘how to write essays’ (which often concentrate on surface and formatting issues rather than compositional ones).

For example, it urges students to see lectures not as means via which information is transmitted from lecturer to student (not always successfully), but as suggesting “a new problematic”. This means that “lectures will endeavour to shed light on historical problems by doubting received wisdom, asking new questions, shifting the angle of vision, suggesting comparisons, testing out alternative interpretations”. There is a wealth of information on how to read, how to make notes, how to study in History more generally – all of which contribute to the argumentative foundations. In a section on ‘Writing History’, the compositional questions come to the fore, and with them, issues of argumentation. *Studying History* states categorically that “your main job is to construct an *argument*”. The major difference between an A-level [the two years prior to university] essay and a degree level essay is that the emphasis is changed decisively from ‘how?’ to ‘why?’. So tackle the problem, read around it, look closely at the rationality and logic (in the broadest sense) of your authors and come to a decision... This is not a call for dogmatism. Your decisions may be multiple, relative, even contradictory.” More specifically, “first, state the argument; second, develop it; third, prove it; and finally, make a link to the next idea.” Note here that an ‘argument’ is used specifically to mean a proposition, a thesis, a claim. And in terms of the kind of evidence that is warranted in History: “Evidence takes two basic forms: (i) historical – facts and figures derived from a study of the past; and (ii) historiographical surveys: your interpretation of schools of thought and the argument of particular historians”. We could equate these two kinds of evidence with primary and secondary sources, though it is important to bear in mind the injunction to problematize accepted ‘facts’ and ‘figures’.

In summary, as far as documentary evidence is concerned, the department is committed to making its students aware of argument’s role in the study of History. It provides detailed guidance on the place of argumentation in reading and writing. It sees argument and

argumentation as central to the business of studying History, and links these (loosely) to the broader phenomenon of criticality. To what degree is such guidance realised in the essay-writing of two first-year students on the course?

Two essays

Student A wrote an examination essay entitled ‘Why did Europe remain at peace between 1945 and 1991?’. The essay, extending to about 1500 words, begins with a paragraph that sets out the parameters of the answer:

To speak of the ‘Long Peace’ of Europe in the mid- or late-twentieth century would have seemed bizarre to the populations who saw themselves as impotent pawns, trapped in the centre of an ongoing conflict between the US and the Soviet Union. Yet only a few years after its end, the Cold War period between the end of the Second World War in 1949 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 is seen as the most peaceful period in modern European history. This essay will explain the peace and its ending in 1991 primarily in terms of the power and decline of the Soviet Union, and thus the ability of Cold War, despite its threat, to prevent real war.

Beginnings of student essays, or indeed of published essays by established writers, do not always follow formulaic patterns. This essay starts tangentially, as if often the case with essays in the humanities. The first words also have the effect of conveying a feeling that we, the audience, have stumbled in on the middle of a conversation: “To speak of the ‘Long Peace’ of Europe in the mid- or late-twentieth century would have seemed bizarre...”. In other words, the very beginning of the essay sets a relaxed yet academic tone. Already, by the end of the first sentence, a tension has been set up: between the notion of a ‘Long Peace’ on the one hand, and the experience of those “trapped in the centre of an ongoing conflict” on the other. Such tensions are almost always productive in academic essays, because they can be explored and exploited to increase criticality and originality.

The second sentence sets up another seeming contrast with “Yet...” although it transpires that the new contrast is merely a reinforcement of the existing one, established in the first sentence. This second sentence is difficult syntactically. Its main point is that the period of stability from 1949 to 1991 (the Cold War period) is associated with peace in Europe, and it also introduces the “collapse of the Soviet Union” at the end of that period, thus leading on to the third sentence. But it does not add that much in argumentative terms; and the sense of lack of momentum, even in this opening to the essay as a whole, is compounded by the syntactic fusion of the “end of the Second World War in 1949” (which received a cross and an exclamation mark from the tutor assessing the paper). It looks, therefore, as though the second sentence is a lost opportunity, because the “Yet...” does not presage a further counterpoint.

The final sentence in the opening paragraph is more conventional, but does add a new dimension: “This essay will explain the peace and its ending in 1991 primarily in terms of the power and decline of the Soviet Union”. The main thesis of the essay is thus established, with a consequent subsidiary point – “and thus the ability of Cold War, despite its threat, to prevent real war” – added. It is not entirely clear which ‘real wars’ are being referred to, as there has been no such war in Europe in the years following the end of the Cold War, unless

we include wars in which European forces have been engaged, like Iraq, the Falklands War, Afghanistan; or as mediating forces in African civil wars; or if we include the wider Europe of the former Yugoslavia.

What can we make of the opening paragraph, then, in terms of its argument? We could expect, in terms of the question in the title, to have the main lineaments of the argument set out and/or to have a background laid out and/or to have begun the argument with a degree of momentum and sufficient style to engage the reader and convince the examiner. The opening is partially successful, I feel, in setting out its parameters; it is less successful in providing a firm basis in fact (that could, of course, come later in the essay in for the form of a *narratio* or recitation of the facts of the case). It also does not fully exploit the pivotal promise of “Yet...” in its second sentence. Analysis of the rest of the essay will not continue in such detailed terms, but rather in terms of how and to what degree the promise of the opening is fulfilled; and how the ending refers back (or not) to the opening. The basis of the analysis of the essay is Toulminian (1958/2003), but with an added element: the analysis includes consideration of the ‘choreography’ of argument: how the moves stand in relation to each other in the progress from the start to the end. We could say of the opening paragraph that its claim (and subsidiary claim) are clear, but that the grounds are a little shaky at this point, and the choreography is uncertain.

How does the essay progress from here? The student has excellent rhetorical skills, with key historical diction (“it seems paradoxical”) and the armoury of pivotal terms on which an argument can swing (“yet”, “thus”, “while it may seem” etc.). But the underlying structure and momentum of the piece does not appear to move on these terms, nor to build itself around paradoxes or inconsistencies in the interpretation to date. Rather, it proceeds, paragraph by paragraph, to prove the main thesis, *viz* that the prolonged peace was a result, primarily, of the power and decline of the Soviet Union. In order to prove the thesis, there is a good deal of data – which becomes evidence when informed by, and in turn when it informs the thesis. But argument consists not only of claims supported by grounds, but also in the support of ideas and notions. For example, the claim that “Europe was left in a limbo stage of *détente* for nearly half a century” is not supported by evidence but is in itself a hypothetical claim. It receives a comment from the marker: “Well...” as if to say that such a claim is itself debatable. At worst, such claims become unsupported generalizations, which are unstable ground on which to support or build an argument.

Typically, the essay progresses in a loose narrative fashion, re-telling a story that itself forms an argument (by the sheer arrangement of its constituent claims and evidence). Some of the criticisms of the marker, written as annotations to the essay itself, are about its broadness. So it seems that the art of a good essay in History at undergraduate level in this university is partly an art of balance: between claims and grounds. But it is also a question of proportionality and scale. To answer a question like “Why did Europe remain at peace between 1945 and 1991?” either requires a high degree of selectivity, or it requires comprehensive *and* detailed analysis (enough for a book, let alone a timed essay). To fall between the two stools of selectivity and comprehensiveness is hard to avoid.

The last two paragraphs of this essay are revealing. The first (the penultimate paragraph) appears to move the argument forward. The second (the last paragraph) seems less successful. The first of these reads:

Yet as Europe did not disintegrate into civil war it can be seen that the Cold War was not the only factor maintaining peace in Europe. The others are the forces of stability that remain in Europe to the present – the desire to avoid war that has been consistent since 1945, the use of multi-national organisations to solve conflicts...the internationalising of economics and, to a lesser extent, politics across Europe.

Looking back over the essay as a whole, it is a shame that these other factors were not brought to bear as alternative or interrelated explanations for the maintenance of peace in the period. They could have been weighed against the factor put forward as part of the main thesis, *viz* that it was the Cold War that enabled peace. Such critical comparison would have made the essay feel more argumentative and less expositional. Rather than looking for evidence and hypotheses to support the main thesis, these could have provided a counterpoint, thus either strengthening or weakening the main thesis.

The final paragraph seems a little gratuitous:

The importance of the Cold War in maintaining European peace between 1945 and 1991 is thus indisputable. Yet as has been illustrated, there have been other profound changes in European politics since 1991 that have prevented another full-scale European war, as happened in 1939. Perhaps, one day, historians will view the Second World War, not the First, as the war to end all European wars.

The “thus” in the first sentence is more of a *quod erat demonstrandum* than something that follows logically from the argument. Closely followed by another “yet”, it has the appearance of logic and argumentation without the substance of ideas underpinning them. Interestingly, too, the final sentence moves away from the topic of the essay to a broad generalization which itself deals with a cliché: ‘the war to end all wars’. Although such a coda can often build on argument to suggest another path of inquiry related to the main one, this one does not.

Overall, the feedback from the lecturer who marked the essay (discussed in detail in Andrews 2009a) noted the strengths and shortcomings mentioned here, with a summary comment that “overall, the argument could have been clearer, with a better structure that links each point to the question”. This comment chimes with the perception that the essay in question replaces concentration on the question itself with a thesis (see discussion of the introductory paragraph) that takes the piece down a particular path: a path that favours exposition rather than argument.

The second essay not only has a different title, but is different in nature: “Gender and society: an analytical comparison of ‘Dislodging the center/complicating the dialectic’ by Laura Tabili and ‘Labor history after the gender turn’ by L.L. Frader”. It asks the student to analytically compare two articles, thus providing the opportunity for direct comparison (itself a useful device in argumentation) rather than the more general question set in for the previously discussed essay. Already, there is better scope for focus and appropriate scale. Student B, then, has an advantage: she has a much more specific brief than student A. The essay begins:

These articles look at how the use of gender as an analytical tool can be beneficial to the study of social structure, which in this case is confined to the labour market.

Despite being published in the same journal, the opinions of the historians, although they agree fundamentally, differ in some areas. According to Tabili [2003] and Frader [2003], although many have claimed to do so, ‘social stratification’ cannot properly be analysed without consideration of a broad range of factors, such as class, gender, race and so on. If these subjects are dealt with separately, their interdependence and relevance can be overlooked. This essay will attempt to examine the differences between the approaches of the two historians and the advantages and disadvantages of approaching the concepts of race and gender in such a way.

The first and last sentences of this introductory paragraph are descriptive and procedural. They do not argue, as such, but simply say what the argument is going to be. It is the central sentences of the paragraph that carry the weight in terms of argument. The first one is a statement of the obvious, however: “Despite being published in the same journal, the opinions of the historians, although they agree fundamentally, differ in some areas”. The student then goes on to make the similarity of position clear: that “‘social stratification’ cannot properly be analysed without consideration of a broad range of factors, such as class, gender, race...”. It is then not clear whether it is the student’s view that “if these subjects are dealt with separately, their interdependence and relevance can be overlooked” or whether this is a shared view of the assigned authors, Tabili and Frader. It is likely that it is a shared view of the chosen authors, which makes the following essay less strikingly original than it might have been. What the student appears to have chosen to do is to elucidate the similarities and differences between the two writers. Such an approach can lead to a very good essay, but lessens the opportunity for original argumentation on the part of the student.

Indeed, the essay is a very good one – it received approbation from the marker for the methodical and detailed approach – but what is missing, again, is a tight focus on the question. In this case, it is the dimension of ‘society’ in the title that has not been given sufficient attention, with most of the attention going to gender issues. The essay progresses in a conventional ‘comparison’ mode, moving backward and forward in its discussion of the two authors, and periodically including a paragraph where they agree. The conclusion is too long to quote in full. What it does is first establish the common ground between Tabili and Frader. Then it distinguishes their approaches with a deft “on the other hand”. The final two sentences are revealing:

Having said this [i.e. that doing labor history from a feminist perspective is partly a political project] she [Frader] does echo Tabili’s sentiments by finishing with the notion that the combining of different modes of analysis creates “more powerful analytical tools for understanding the past and perhaps also the present”. Society as we know it is made up of those of different races, genders, classes, beliefs and so on, to study any of these factors in isolation negates from their greater role in society – that which is in relation to other themes.

The first sentence here is promising in that it comes back to the convergence of ideas between Tabili and Frader. Here we can see how the choreography of argumentation works in detail, with the first three steps of the concluding paragraph [not quoted] being ‘together - separate - separate’ points. If the essay had ended there, we would have had one of those tantalising endings that are pregnant with further meaning. But it does not, and goes on to an awkwardly

expressed, and syntactically confusing sentence which dissipates the power of the preceding sentences, reverting to generalization and, in this case, vague generalization.

It is easy to criticize essays by students who are working under pressure; but, at the same time, it is instructive to make comparisons between essays such as these. One clear point is that the title of the essay is crucial to its structure and to the possibilities for argument. If an essay title does not invite argument, or does not provide the beginnings of a structure in the wording of the title, weaker students will find it more difficult to create an argument. A more specific focus will help, as will an invitation to ‘contrast and compare’. What is a matter of concern for tutors and students alike is to make sure that the questions set for coursework and for examination do give students the chance to show their argumentative skills at their best, and do not invite exposition where argument is intended. We now turn to what these particular students say about their experience of argument and argumentation on the course. They were interviewed two-thirds of the way through the course, after induction, a Making History module, and three period-based modules; and before modules on Historical Perspectives and Histories in Context in the summer term/semester.

Interviews with the students

Student A was interviewed on her thoughts on argument in first-year History, rather than on the particular essay discussed above. She was aware of different ways of structuring an argument, so that “as well as exploring a point of view and having evidence to support it, it can work the other way round as well: you can start with a logical [narrative] process and say ‘this happened, then this happened, then this happened’ and *then* have an argument at the end of it”. Such an approach is similar to the function of the device called ‘narratio’ in classical rhetoric: the recitation of the facts of the case as part of an argument. In the case of the History essay, however, the ‘facts of the case’ are subjected to interrogation, which in turn generates the argument. This student was very aware that it was possible in History to have more than one argument operating in terms of a set of ‘facts’ and for all of them to seem right; though she was also aware – particularly so as a new student in the discipline – that she would gradually be able to distinguish between stronger and weaker arguments as she read more and became more aware of historiographic processes and techniques.

The gradual apprenticeship to the craft of writing History is one she did not see as a matter of just learning a technique. The idea of a separate course in argumentation or in rhetoric was anathema to her. Rather, she preferred the *techne* approach: “I feel like I’m learning; it’s not a formula. You are learning techniques for doing it [the discipline]. They are both thinking and writing techniques, but the most important is thinking.” As a result, she would integrate argumentation and other skills “into the study of a subject”. However, she saw a value in exercises on the way to writing an argument, like brief assignments in which sources were compared, an intensive discussion on the nature and interpretation of a primary source; and in oral argumentation, like debates, class discussions and the trying out and developing of a ‘voice’ in History. This latter aspect applied to writing too, but was something to be developed after a good deal of reading and investigation, so that a space could be opened up for an original contribution. Such spaces for original angles were not just rhetorical: they were, it was hoped, a genuine contribution to knowledge. It was for this reasons that she shied away from the *topoi* of History: the controversial topics that offered no easy resolution. Instead, she was keen to explore territories of History in which she could make an original

contribution via the discovery and interpretation of new evidence or the creation of a new angle on a topic. She felt the traditional *topoi* – for example, the causes of the second world war – were over-populated.

Structurally, she was aware that her own arguments did not always reflect the overall argument she wanted to make – this was a point of persistent feedback from her lecturers. Such a mis-match, she considered, was due partly to the fact that although she planned her essays, she found herself wandering off the track by generating new arguments along the way. And yet part of the pleasure of writing essays in History was the discovery of new ideas, new propositions, new angles in the course of actually writing the essay. Nevertheless, she found that her essay-writing had improved, largely as a result of feedback. Even after two terms at the university, she was operating intellectually rather than procedurally, so that beginnings of essays were not a matter of saying what she was about to say (“In this essay I will...”) but of diving in at the deep end with a proposition (an ‘argument’ in History) and then developing it, providing evidence, considering and fending off counter-arguments etc. This approach led her to describe a pyramidal structure to her essays in which the nub of the argument(s) was mentioned in the beginning, and that nub was explored during the main body of the essay. The ‘triangle or pyramid in my head’ became the structuring metaphor, with points for the argument gaining precedence and space over points against. She explained that although in her mind the pyramid was evenly balanced between points for and against, it was probably the case that ‘the points for’ were given more space (which is where the metaphor begins to weaken). Clearly, though, the main points were addressed first and the minor points later, with a concluding paragraph to reinforce the base of the argument/pyramid.

Finally, student A found feedback from lecturers - either orally in tutorials or in writing in response to essays - was “definitely the most effective” means to learn how to make “a sensible, structured piece of writing”. Much of this feedback, she found, focussed on argument. Although “a lot of feedback was a list of things that were wrong with [my essays]”, she found that feedback helpful. She used it to try and improve her thinking and her compositional approach. She was in no doubt that “the lecturers are after a very clear argument; but they also want you to consider other points of view too”.

Student B’s approach to argument had much in common with Student A’s, with some significant differences. In terms of differences, she stated: “My style has improved. I was a very concise person. I’ve learnt to expand on points because I’m aiming at the end of the course towards a dissertation. You have to be able to analyse and develop points”. That expansion is partly to do with the length of assignments, but also with the perception that history at undergraduate level is about problematising. Whereas on the pre-university course (A-level in this case) it was possible to end an essay with an answer, “historians often conclude that it is impossible to conclude”. Indeed, “one sometimes takes stances just to be controversial. With a controversial topic you can do more with evidence that may not have been done before – which in turn provokes further argument”. So whereas student A likes to avoid the main controversial areas in order to find issues where she can make a contribution, student B sees her contributions as emerging from the main areas of dispute within the discipline: she positively seeks them out. The predilection for argument stems, in her case, from involvement in debating societies at school (continued into such activities at university) and a passion for words.

She is also aware that “the more you know the more you can argue”, and that such confidence comes from wide and deep reading.

In terms of the process of composing arguments, student B likes to start by breaking down the question and making definitions, for example in the distinction between ‘nations’ and ‘nationalism’. Before the actual start of the writing process, however, she finds the most difficult aspect of essay-writing is moving from a visual plan of the essay she wants to write to the linear business of writing it. Although she is a self-declared ‘mind-map person’, the problem lies in holding on to the spatial and visual design of the mind-map in the actual linear writing of the essay itself. It is easy to link points on a local basis, but soon one can find oneself straying away from the overall design. She finds herself saying ‘Hang on a minute...’ and re-considering the overall design in relation to the wording of the title/question. The problem is clearly defined here: “you can’t have two things happening at the same time”, viz the overall structural design with its vertical and spatial qualities on the one hand; and the linear, horizontal progression of the words on the page in their sentences and paragraphs on the other. Both in the composition and in the reading of such verbal constructs as essays, the linear momentum is the more powerful. Often, she feels, lecturers who are marking essays do not see the vertical patterning that underpins the design, and yet they ask for it. The problem has been that the vertical structuring does not readily manifest itself in the horizontal articulation and expression of the essay form.

Another paradox of which the student is aware is that although historians “want truth and knowledge [they] won’t accept things: they want to challenge [truth and knowledge]” as soon as they find them. Such scepticism is seen as the hallmark of a historian. But she sees these skills of reading against the grain as one of the many valuable attributes that historians have: they are aware that “what you leave out can be as important as what you put in”; that facts can be manipulated; and that if you are good at counter-argument you can often pre-empt an objection. In order to improve further over the course of a degree, she would advocate more use of oral argumentation in the form of debates and discussions that are directly related (by the lecturers and students) to the written forms in which they are asked to write: “we have a lot of independent learning...it might help with written argumentation if we could bounce ideas off each other more”.

Interviews with teaching staff and a more detailed analysis of the nature and value of lecturer feedback on the course in question are included in Andrews (2009a) and Andrews et al. (2009).

Conclusion

It is not the intention of this article to triangulate between the three sources of data: the documentary evidence, the essays and the interviews. Rather, they are used to shed light on practices in a particular department in History and to sharpen questions about how students are inducted into the discourses of a discipline – and how that induction might be improved. What is clear from this limited study is that argument and argumentation are central to the study of History in this department. Both students learn, within the first six months of the course, that improvement in argumentation is principally a matter of *thinking* historically; and secondarily a matter of verbal (spoken and written) articulation and expression, structure and focus. It is clear, too, that some essay questions invite argument more readily than others, and

that students can be at a disadvantage if the invitation is not explicit. Questions that are raised by the study include:

- What specific discussions and documents are helpful to students as they start a course at university and need to know the argumentative discourses and expectations of the discipline? When, and how often, is it best to re-visit these issues?
- How do disciplines differ in their demands on students?
- What qualities can students bring to studying a particular discipline, in terms of argumentation, that will help them progress more readily?

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ⁱ No references are given to the documentation from the department in question, in order to preserve its anonymity.