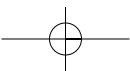
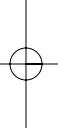
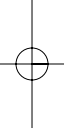


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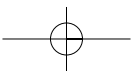
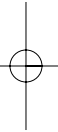
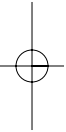
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# **The importance of argument in education**

Richard Andrews

Professor in English

Based on an Inaugural Professorial Lecture delivered at the Institute of Education,  
University of London, on 12 May 2009





Professor Richard Andrews

# The importance of argument in education

## Introduction

‘Argument’ is itself a contentious term. It refers to everyday arguments – tiffs, spats, rows, argy-bargies – that take place in domestic, professional and public contexts and which at the same time appal and fascinate, divide and unite us. But it also refers to the most highly prized type of academic discourse: something that is deemed essential to a thesis, to an article in a research journal, to a dissertation, essay, and to many other kinds of writing within schools and the academy.

When the whole range of definitions of argument is considered, a number of aspects of argument are highlighted: the two broad definitions cited above, but also ‘the working out of a third point from two given points’ in logic and in mathematics and astronomy. More specifically, with regard to mathematics: ‘the angle, arc or other mathematical quantity from which another required quantity may be deduced’. ‘Argument’ also meant to Swift and his contemporaries a synopsis of the plot: each of the chapters of *Gulliver’s Travels* begins with a short ‘argument’. The argument in this case is pure chronicle, the bare bones of the narrative. Embodied in such a definition is the notion that a narrative can signify an argument, and that what follows in a time sequence or narrative sequence (not always the same thing) somehow is a causal result of what came before: the principle of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (after this, therefore because of this). Parables and fables are examples of compressed narratives

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that are clearly and explicitly argumentational. But, if you accept the *post hoc* principle, all anecdotes, all stories, all novels are arguments to one degree or another. The two meta-genres, narrative and argument, simply operate in different ways.

A final aspect of argument is the process of argument: argumentation. This is a technical term, distinguishing the processes of argument from the phenomenon, the product, the thing itself. It also appears to distance the process somewhat from the everyday – you would not say after a verbal fight, for example, that you had indulged in a bit of ‘argumentation’ unless you were being deliberately mock-heroic – giving it a quasi-scientific, detached, technical nuance. The book that is to be published by Routledge later in 2009, *Argumentation in Higher Education: Improving practice through theory and research*, deliberately chooses the technical term because that is what it intends: not ‘argument in higher education’, which would mean something different. The title of this lecture uses ‘argument’ in order to keep the aperture wide, and to be able to relate social functions of argument to argument in schools and the academy.

## The importance of argument in society

In the January 2009 issue of the *New York Review of Books* (Link, 2009), China’s Charter 08 was translated into English with a preface and postscript by Perry Link. Charter 08 was conceived in admiration of the Czechoslovakian Charter 77. As Link says, it ‘calls not for ameliorative reform of the current political system, but for an end to some of its essential features, including one-party rule, and their replacement with a system based on human rights and democracy’ (54). The charter sets out the historical context, a set of fundamental principles and a section on ‘what we advocate’. In other words, it is radical, polemical, and, in an authoritarian context, highly risky. Link records in his postscript that a number of signatories of the charter were, in the days running up to its announcement on 10 December, visited in their homes by the police for what is described as a ‘chat’ and threatened with prison. ‘Do you want

three years in prison,' they are quoted as saying, 'or four?' Even in that short sentence, the uncontestable power of authoritarianism is present. Indeed, Liu Xiaobo, one of the first signers of the charter and a veteran of Tiananmen Square in 1989, was taken away by police on 8 December and in late January was still in detention 'somewhere in the suburbs of Beijing'. My point here is not so much about the politics of China, as about the importance of argument in an authoritarian society even when it is denied.

Not that democracies are pure when it comes to detention, or the free passage of argument and argumentation. We only have to consider the war against terrorism, the reasons proffered for the invasion of Iraq, the establishment and use of Guantánamo Bay, to find actions taken without argument and without the application of valid evidence. The closing of Guantánamo – the very first act of the new president of the United States – seems like the act of a *deus ex machina* until we remember that it is the result of a democratic process; and that the dismantling of Guantánamo and its supporting infrastructure of fear and, more importantly, a proper legal and judicial review of its detainees, will require a great deal of patient, detailed and passionate argumentation.

Democracies, in general, are seen to be the natural home for argument because they are in tune with change: creating, understanding, tolerating and resolving difference, where possible. Argument is prized in true democracies, just as it was in the crucible of pre-Athenian and Athenian democracy. It is seen as the *sine qua non*, the very life-blood of democracy in action. Behind the centrality of argument in such societies is the notion that 'truth emerges from the clash of opposites' or that the quality of life can be enhanced by arguing out the best way forward; that by, at first, polar opposition and then by degrees, refinement of a proposition takes place until it becomes workable law and practice. This is the function argument has within democratic societies. One has to accept that, in the end, the decision on how to move forward may be taken by one person; or that he or she may be the leader of a party that has a numerical majority; but the base of the iceberg of that process is argumentation.

Imagine, for a moment, a world without argument. It would either be an authoritarian or tyrannical state, or like the island of Tennyson's lotos-eaters where 'All round the coast the languid air did swoon/Breathing like one that

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hath a weary dream' – a land where intellect and difference are suspended. So, simply to wake up, to be fully conscious, is to be ready for argumentation; for discussion 'with edge'. You might think Buddhism worked toward a state where there was none of the pull-and-push of Hegelian dialectic, no division, a melting of self and the world – and so, in essence, it is, but of a very different kind from Tennyson's; one of the most interesting strands in the International Society for the Study of Argumentation conferences, which happen every four years in Amsterdam, is on 'Buddhist argumentation'. Buddhists enjoy argument as both a space in which they can play at dialecticism in which the world is trapped, or use it to break through to higher ground.

Back in the world, and more locally, negotiations over a curriculum, or debates about what should go in a core module for a new Masters programme, require argument. In our professional lives, argumentation pays an important part because, again, it is a means of resolving difference, a way of exploring an idea to its logical conclusion, a means by which a range of views can be expressed, arrayed, clarified and then form the basis for a decision, based on the best available evidence. You may not end up agreeing with the way forward in a particular situation; but if you have had a chance to express your views, challenge existing orthodoxies and make a difference to the outcome, you feel enfranchised and engaged. You can sidle off and grumble if you lose the argument, or you can marshal your resources and re-enter the argumentational fray. Those who can see the process for what it's worth, can see the limitations of power, and see that argumentational exchange is a force for good, can sometimes prize the process more than the outcome. There's a danger in that position, of course, because you can end up winning the arguments or enjoying the argumentational process, but losing the battle for *what happens* once a consensus of sorts is agreed.

Even more locally, arguments take place in everyday life, in domestic and personal circumstances, from time to time. Sometimes, it has to be admitted, the generation of an argument can lead to division and estrangement, even to violence (though it is to hoped that argumentation, in both personal and political settings, would be a key way of resolving difference without recourse to violence). In most cases, however, arguments or tiffs, spats and rows have



a number of functions. They are often triggered by something that is not the real cause of the difference. The real causes emerge during the course of the exchange, but the functions include clarification of position; catharsis; recognition; discovery of the truth; defence of your position. Rarely does a personal argument end up doing what the participants think it does: persuading the other party to accept your point of view.

In fact, argument and argumentation are not the same as persuasion, despite Aristotle's definition of rhetoric (one of argument's principal theoretical frameworks) as 'the art of persuasion'. Advertisements persuade, physical presence sometimes persuades, but they don't always argue their case. Persuasion can be seen as one of the functions of argument, alongside clarification, catharsis, amusement, defence, attack and winning; the discovery of ideas; the creation and resolution of difference; and so on. Having separated the phenomenon of argument and its process, argumentation, from the function of persuasion, there is one other ground-clearing act that needs to be done before we can go on to explore the theoretical hinterland of argument in education. Argument, while properly associated with rationality, is often thought to be opposed to passion and feeling. Rather than accept such an easy polarity, argument and rationality can be seen as deeply implicated in passion and feeling. There are many examples of this close relationship in personal and public life. One such example centres on the notion of *intuition*: you will hear people say 'I decided that intuitively' or 'My intuition told me that . . .'. Rather than see intuition as diametrically opposed to argument and argumentation, it is possible to see it as *high speed rationality*.

## Theory

There is a long history of the theory of argumentation, mostly associated with rhetoric from pre-Athenian times to the contemporary rhetorics of Burke (1969), American composition theorists, the visual/verbal explorations of W.J.T. Mitchell (1986) and Lanham (1993) (the Chicago school), and Gunther Kress, Theo van Leeuwen and colleagues' work on multimodality (e.g. Kress

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and van Leeuwen, 2001). The battle between philosophy or logic on the one hand, and rhetoric on the other, has waged throughout that history, with sometimes one in the ascendancy, and sometimes the other. They appear to be symbiotic: logic needs rhetoric and vice versa. To compress the debates into a simple equation: logic and philosophy are concerned with substance and method; rhetoric is concerned with process and communication, with the 'arts of discourse' in personal, political and aesthetic contexts. For the particular purposes of the present lecture, the focus will be on two figures who provide a backdrop to the interest in argumentation in education: Vygotsky, a social psychologist; and the philosopher Habermas. Neither is a rhetorician, though both bodies of work draw on communication and the arts of discourse, and have implications for the fields of rhetoric and argumentation. Both have key things to say about the relationship between argument and education, from preschool through to university level and beyond.

### Vygotsky

The most extraordinary and significant statement from Vygotsky's work with regard to argument is the connection he makes between reflection and argumentation. With characteristic (not always empirically founded) logical verve and confidence, he writes:

there is an indubitable genetic connection between the child's arguments and his reflections. This is confirmed by the child's logic itself. The proofs first arise in the arguments between children and are then transferred within the child. . . . The child's logic develops only with the increasing socialisation of the child's speech and all of the child's experience. . . . Piaget has found that precisely the sudden transition from preschool age to school age leads to a change in the forms of collective activity and that on this basis the child's thinking also changes. 'Reflection,' says this author, 'may be regarded as inner argumentation . . .'

If we consider this law, we will see very clearly why all that is internal in the higher mental functions was at one time external . . . . In general

we may say that *the relations between the higher mental functions were at one time real relations between people. . . .*

We might therefore designate the main result to which we are brought by the history of the child's cultural development as a sociogenesis of *the higher forms of behaviour.*

(Vygotsky, 1991: 32–41)

The excerpt is quoted at length to demonstrate the steps via which Vygotsky comes to the conclusion that argumentation was once external. Much of the thinking is informed by Vygotsky's well-known theory of the ways in which cultural and historical patterning informs cognitive and conceptual development. But there are several striking connections made in the statement above that shed particular light on argumentation.

First is the connection between arguments and reflections. Putting aside whether the connection is indubitably genetic or not, the link suggests that reflection is more than a miasmatic, static read-off from experience. Rather, it is seen as dynamic mental space informed by social arguments (the sociogenetic aspect); and, furthermore, is in itself a dialectical operation in which the dialogue is both with experience/the outside world on the one hand, and with ideas themselves in the internal process of reflecting/thinking.

Second, Vygotsky's statement that 'all that is internal in the higher mental functions was at one time external' can be broken down into two propositions: one that there are relations between the higher mental functions; and two, that these relations 'were at one time real relations between people'. We need not spend too much time on the notion that there are relations between the higher mental functions, except to say that hierarchical ('vertical', 'synchronic' and 'paradigmatic') and relational ('horizontal', 'diachronic' and 'syntagmatic') thinking is fundamental to subjects and disciplines in various combinations and with varying emphases. Not all these higher mental functions are grounded in verbal language; some are based on other languages, like dance, the visual arts, architecture, music. Most are multimodal in their actual operation in the world. Nevertheless, these hierarchical and relational connections are central to and critical to the operation of learning and teaching in disciplines in higher

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education. Learning your way across a grid of such relations is learning to become competent (and thus worthy of the award of academic degrees) in the various disciplines, subjects and fields. The development of the higher mental functions is associated with the entry to and success within higher education.

The proposition that such interconnections 'were at one time real relations between people' is the truly astonishing idea. The logic follows from earlier propositions in the quotation above and in Vygotsky's work more generally about the formation of thinking in young children. At higher education level, let us consider the implications of the statement. Part of the underlying justification for the statement is that the development of disciplinary practices, historically, is the result of 'real relations between people'. The birth of English literature as a university subject in England, for example, arose from a dialectical need expressed, over a number of years, by workers' educational associations and particularly by women studying within and beyond those associations, for an alternative to classics as a central (but male-only) humanities discipline at the University of Oxford and subsequently elsewhere. The history of that evolution is well documented in Dixon (1991). As the emergent subject established itself in the university repertoire, discussions between academics, students and others would determine its development. Specifically, patterns of expectation and convention, e.g. what counts as a good argument in the discipline, the nature of the canon, the *modus operandi* in seminars, the journals created, the discourses and Discourse of the discipline – all these would establish themselves and be adapted further. Thus, the lines and conduits along which thought and argumentation take place are determined, distinguishing the discipline from others. When these conduits for thought and argumentation become too over-prescribed, a reaction sets in that changes, with Hegelian inevitability, the nature of discourses that are 'allowed' within the disciplinary framework that has been established. Such 'real relations between people' are largely mediated by speech, social power and economics.

A case like the emergence and development of English literature in England has 150 years of history, and Vygotsky's phrase 'at one time' can refer to far-distant history (too far to be evidentially researched and validated) or to a more compressed time-scale. In a much more specific way, Bazerman (1988) charts the

development of the experimental article in science, demonstrating how a vehicle for argumentation in a meta-discipline like science emerged from social interactions between people, and relations between people and the material world.

To give a much more contemporary example, consider the relations between a student on an undergraduate course and his or her lecturer/teacher. The student submits a piece of writing. Explicitly and/or implicitly, the lecturer proves feedback in spoken or written form that suggests to the student how he/she might 'improve', i.e. might get closer to and exceed the expected discourses of the discipline at undergraduate level. Such interaction, at its best, is specific, extensive, formative and positively critical. Whatever its quality, it is *always* part of a set of institutional and personal power relations. Thus 'real relations between people', different in nature from the previous two examples of the birth of a discipline or the creation of the scientific article, determine the operation of the higher mental functions.

### **Habermas**

At the core of Habermas' work is the notion that communicative competence is more than being able to generate and understand utterances and sentences. He suggests that we are constantly making claims. These claims are often implicit, and often they are not backed up by evidence; but the exchange of claims appears to be part of the fabric of human interaction. As McCarthy puts it in the introduction to his translated edition of Habermas' major work on rationality and communication, *The Theory of Communicative Action*,

we are constantly making claims, even if usually only implicitly, concerning the validity of what we are saying, implying or presupposing – claims, for instance, regarding the truth of what we say in relation to the objective world; or claims concerning the rightness, appropriateness, or legitimacy of our speech acts in relation to the shared values and norms of our social lifeworld; or claims to sincerity or authenticity in regard to the manifest expressions of our intentions and feelings.

(Habermas, 1984: x)

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Claims do require evidence – or at least they need a degree of validation that might come from logical consistency, the character of the speaker, the nature of the context, or via methodological support – and they are more likely to be accepted if they are supported in a number of these ways. At the same time, they can be challenged, defended and qualified. As suggested above, claims might be strengthened by being subjected to challenge. Indeed, the very nature of making claims (one ingredient in the making of an argument) is that they invite counter-claim. Habermas' particular contribution to the thinking about communication is his insistence that mutual understanding without coercion is the basis of rationality, and of human consensus and social action.

Within Habermas' view of societies reaching consensus and thus being able to 'get on' with the business of the everyday world, argumentation has a particularly significant function:

The rationality proper to the communicative practice of everyday life points to the practice of argumentation as a court of appeal that makes it possible to continue communicative action with other means when disagreement can no longer be headed off by everyday routines and yet is not to be settled by the direct or strategic use of force.

(Habermas, 1984, 1: 17–18)

Thus, to varying degrees, and in contexts ranging from the everyday and seemingly mundane at one end of the spectrum to high politics at the other end, argumentation is part of the fabric of human existence. Its status as a 'court of appeal' suggests that it can be made explicit and raised to a level of social consciousness where the best way forward can be debated. But it is also implicit in the conduct of human interaction, even when it is not acknowledged as such. Such a fundamental and central role for argumentation is important for the thesis of the present lecture. For example, tacit and implicit practices in higher education often need to be made more explicit in order to help teachers understand what they are asking students to do, and, in turn, for students to understand what they are being asked to do.

Perhaps the most telling statement from Habermas with regard to the purposes of this lecture is his assertion that argumentation is closely linked to learning:

Argumentation plays an important role in learning processes as well. Thus we call a person rational who, in the cognitive-instrumental sphere, expresses reasonable opinions and acts efficiently; but this rationality remains accidental if it is not coupled with the ability to learn from mistakes, from the refutation of hypotheses and from the failure of interventions.

(ibid.: 18)

Like Vygotsky's statement on the genesis of the higher mental functions, Habermas' insight into the centrality of a process, argumentation, which is at the heart of primary, secondary and tertiary education, is a crucial one. Being rational means being able to learn from mistakes, from critiquing half-formed hypotheses and from the failure of interventions in experimental and non-experimental situations. Such openness to learning via the process of argumentation is one to which teachers, lecturers and professors, at their very best, are amenable; and one which pupils and students have to learn to develop if they are to progress within their chosen subjects, disciplines or fields of enquiry.

## Argument in education

What, in addition to what Vygotsky and Habermas have already suggested, has the foregoing discussion of argument's place in social discourse and cognitive development got to do with education? First, in classic Toulminian rebuttal (or counterpoint) terms – and based on fact, not just rhetorical positioning – is argument fostered in educational settings? The answer, in too many cases, is no. The English educational system has moved, over a period of 20 years or so, to one in which an increasingly prescriptive and narrow curriculum has been

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increasingly assessed. To put it another way, the commodification of learning into assessable packages, in a model that derives from the failed 1980s American business discourse of targets, products and learning outcomes, has led to a situation where rarely in the 5–16 curriculum are pupils and students asked to articulate at length, either in speech or writing; where the regurgitation of information takes up more time than thinking about that information; where the celebration of a single voice through narration, again, in the 1980s-informed, late-Romantic tradition, is still prevalent.

There are systemic changes for the good, like the broadening of the range of types of writing that are required in the 2000 version of the National Curriculum. There are ‘green shoots’ of good theory and practice, like Robin Alexander’s notion of dialogic teaching (2008); philosophy in primary schools (Lipman, 1976); and the work of the critical thinking movement (though critical thinking is not the same as argumentation).

Three examples, from different stages in the education process in England, will suffice to demonstrate the importance of argument in education. The first is from a discussion between four children in a Year 1 class of 5- to 6-year-olds, recorded in the 1990s. Their brief was to record a discussion on a topic that was important to them, and to do so independently of the class teacher in a corner of the school and equipped with a recorder:

RICHARD: What do you think about playtimes, Carly?

CARLY: I think they are quite good because you can play and my best friend is Anna...

RICHARD: James? Emma?

EMMA: Well I think playtimes are good because sometimes people want to play with you and they are kind to you when you fall over.

RICHARD: James?

JAMES: Sometimes you can meet people, play with people.

RICHARD: What I think is playtimes are pretty bad but I like them. They are pretty nice things.

CARLY: Look outside now. It’s quite sunny. That’s part of the good things.



RICHARD: And sometimes when it's sunny we're allowed to have our coats off.

CARLY: Yes. That's the best thing really.

JAMES: We can go on the grass.

RICHARD: Yes, that's a good part.

EMMA: I think the bad thing is when a bully pushes you over. I don't think it's fair when nobody helps you.

RICHARD: It's awful when you fall over and people laugh.

JAMES: It's really awful. You've got to go and tell Miss, don't you?

CARLY: Emma, I thought you said a minute ago that you like playtimes.

EMMA: Well it doesn't mean actually playtimes are nice. It's bad and good.

CARLY: Yes. I think it's a mix, isn't it?

EMMA: Yes, it's a mix, a mix, a mix.

Putting aside Richard's chairing skills, what can be identified as argument here? Carly and Emma each start with a statement and proof informed by logical or quasi-logical connection ('I think playtimes are good because...') though you could say that Carly's proof ('because you can play') is quickly followed by what my teachers used to write all over my essays: a *non-sequitur* ('and my best friend is Anna'). It could be the case, however, that this is no *non-sequitur* for Carly; and that the 'and' in her utterance signifies a causal or relational connection of a kind. The first third of the extract establishes some propositions and some supporting 'evidence', simply to give the propositions some ballast. Richard's position is typical of that of a chair: 'I think playtimes are pretty bad but I like them. They are pretty nice things.' The important thing is that he introduces the notion that playtimes can be bad as well as good.

The second third moves to finding more evidence, more proof for the two propositions that are now established. The discussion is largely consensual, moving the argument along together with supporting points and a desire to ensure the coherence of the group itself: a pattern that can be seen in many school small-group conversations. In such discussions, the idea of

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argumentation can be threatening; it can disrupt or de-stabilise the cohesion of the group; it can be ‘taken personally’. This is why many such groups prefer the term ‘discussion’ to the term ‘argument’. Argument looks like ‘discussion with *too much* edge’.

But ‘edge’ is exactly what starts the third part of the extract above: ‘Emma, I thought you said a minute ago that you like playtimes.’ The ploy is a devastating one, and one with which we are familiar from Parliament: ‘The right honourable member contradicts precisely what he/she said last week, and what is said in the policy statement...’. But Emma moves on to the position that perhaps Richard was stumbling towards earlier in the discussion: ‘It’s bad and good’ or the succinct outlet that Carly offers her: ‘it’s a mix’. The collective understanding that at least three of the participants have come to – that ‘it’s a mix, a mix, a mix’ – is an important one for 5- to 6-year-olds to have come to through their own deliberations: that the question of whether playtimes are good or bad is a complex one; that there is evidence that can be brought to bear on propositions; that people can disagree without falling out with each other; that thesis and antithesis can lead to a new synthesis; that if pupils and students argue about topics that they care about, they don’t seem to have a problem in bringing complex abstraction and interaction to bear. This last point leads on to the practice in some schools of schools councils, where, if there is genuine consideration of pupils’ views leading to action in the community of the school and/or the wider community, then young people will feel ‘franchised’, that what they say matters, and that they can make a difference in the world.

The second example is from close to the other end of the spectrum: from the work of a third-year undergraduate student in English literature. The course is ‘Shakespeare on Film’, and the essay question to be answered is “‘I believe that Shakespeare was a feminist, and all the plays I direct analyse ... the roles of women from that ideological point of view” (Michael Bogdanov). Discuss this view of the presentation of women in one or more Shakespeare films.’ The essay has the virtue of diving in at the deep end – though the angle of the dive is very carefully judged, both rhetorically and substantially, to make a point right from the start:

Ostensibly the role of women in Shakespeare's writing seems a negligible one – they can be seen as purely wives, sisters, daughters, mistresses or servants of the male protagonists, functioning only as subservient confidants or messengers. Yet . . .

What is interesting and impressive in argumentational terms about that opening is that it is contrapuntal: to move the metaphor away from pools and diving, it starts on the offbeat. Immediately, an argumentational voice is established, and the main beat is hit at the beginning of the second sentence with one of the main propositions in the essay, *viz* that despite the seeming deference of women in Shakespeare (and it can only be the case in some of the roles), they are foregrounded in performance and on film – though this foregrounding in itself may not be ideologically sound:

In film these feminine narratives are constructed technically, in the way the director 'photographs women, in close-up, in mid- or long-shot, in tracking shots; by turns intensifying concentration on a face, an eye, a foot or impassively observing, or drawing back, marooning women in compositions that register isolations and them as objects' (Rutter, 2007) [and so] their roles are exposed in different ways according to the director's intention.

The essay continues with a critique of Trevor Nunn's film adaptation of *Twelfth Night*, then comes back at the end, more generally, to re-address the question. The contrapuntal start is something many undergraduate students find difficult, in reading argument as well as composing it: they cannot distinguish the main points from the subsidiary ones, and according to research with first-year psychology students in a mid-western university in the USA (Larson *et al.*, 2004), they may often mis-construe an argument because they do not know that an argument can start on the counterpoint. Such tangential writing is typical of arguments in literature and perhaps other humanities subjects. Such elliptical angles are not the case in engineering.

The third example, then, is from a Masters level final dissertation project in engineering – where the argument manifests itself differently. There are words

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in this 60-page dissertation, but they sit alongside diagrams, mathematical calculations and computer programming. The argument is embodied in the whole multimodal work:

The objective of the project was to develop a piece of software for use with gear design. It would act both as a learning aid for students studying engineering . . . and as a research tool to aid the stress analysis of gear teeth.

The produced software was tested, first with students to measure its usability, then against example calculations from gear handbooks to assess the accuracy of the software's built-in calculations.

The dissertation progresses from an introduction, which sets out the background to the problem and reviews existing gear software; through gear transmission theory to an account of the software development. It then discusses the software capabilities, tests the software, gauging its effectiveness as a learning aid and research tool; and finally discusses and concludes. The argument is basically: 'there is a need for new software in this field. I created it, tested it, and conclude that it makes an effective contribution to the field. Here is the tested product.' Behind that ostensibly simple argument is a wealth of data that provides evidence for the claims and the process.

The main point is that argument manifests itself in different subjects and disciplines in different ways, and these ways have to be learnt as the pupil or student makes his or her way through schooling to university. Differentiation increases as subjects turn into disciplines. Often the criteria for success in argumentation are hidden or not made explicit, and yet they remain one of the most important criteria for success. To return to the main theme, however, certain elements of argument and argumentation remain constantly important throughout education. These are: the formulation of propositions or claims; supporting and/or testing those propositions with evidence; being clear about how the links are made between propositions and claims (what Toulmin calls the 'warrant'); using rebuttal to challenge the proposition, the evidence and/or the link between the two; and understanding the sets of values, ideolo-

gies or disciplinary practices and *mores* that provide further contextual validation for the argument.

It was noted that the engineering dissertation used a range of modes to build its argument. The lecture now turns to consider whether, and if so in what ways and to what degree, an argument can be carried by visual images alone.

## Visual argumentation

Argument is not the same as persuasion. There is no doubt that images can persuade, and there are countless examples from advertising through photo-journalism to fine art that could be cited. But can still images, sequences of still images, and moving images *argue* without words? If so, how do they operate? And is it the same kind of argument that Toulmin would find to be argument, with claims, evidence, rebuttals, warrants and backing as part of its armoury, its architecture? Some would argue that visual argumentation is just not possible. The Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Mannheim University, co-founder and Director of the Mannheim Centre for European Social Research, Walter Müller, said to me recently, in a cab on the way to Abu Dhabi Airport, that he found the notion of a dissertation or thesis without verbal argumentation incredible, because of the conceptual mapping and machinery that words supply in the development of an argument. In the duty-free, some hours later, and again in the departure lounge, he was still shaking his head and smiling at the preposterousness of the idea.

It is, however, important to consider the possibility of visual argumentation in thinking more generally about the importance of argument in education. Here, education is taken to be the whole sum of education – not just schooling. Consideration of visual argumentation is important because it is ubiquitous, subliminal, sometimes (like words) insidious, visceral, engaging; as well as consciously designed, a language and semiotic of its own, a universal agent of communication. We need to be aware of the ways it operates so that we can accept it via a suspension of disbelief, or resist it, and/or *transform* it in some way (the key act of learning and education). By visual *argumentation* as opposed

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to visual *persuasion*, what is meant is a focus on the way the visual articulates, or is articulated, in order to communicate and possibly persuade.

The first example combines the visual with the verbal.

<p>Anyone for green tea?</p>  <p>www.magimix.com</p>	<p>We've been designing products for over 30 years and we're constantly looking at ways to perfect them. Our latest creation is something special. The kettle's unique double wall jacket retains heat, so once you've boiled the kettle, any water left inside stays warm for longer. Which means, next time it's boiled you'll use less electricity, saving you money and helping save the environment. More tea anyone?</p> <p><b>magimix</b> Built better to last longer</p>
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The verbal text of the advertisement is a mini-argument in its own right:

We've been designing products for over 30 years and we're constantly looking at ways to perfect them. Our latest creation is something special. The kettle's unique double wall jacket retains heat, so once you've boiled the kettle, any water left inside stays warm for longer. Which means, next time it's boiled you'll use less electricity, saving you money and helping save the environment. More tea anyone?

In fact, it is not just a good piece of advertising copy; it follows classical structuring possibilities of the kind mapped out by Aristotle, Quintilian, Cicero and others. The appeal to trust to establish the position ('We've been designing products for over 30 years . . .'); the future-looking vision and commitment ('. . . and we're constantly looking at ways to perfect them'); the distinctiveness of the case ('Our latest creation is something special'); the *narratio* or facts of the case ('The kettle's . . . stays warm for longer'); development ('Which means

... helping save the environment’); and, finally, the *peroratio* (‘More tea anyone?’) answering the cleverly nuanced invitation of the title, (‘Anyone for *green* tea?’). There is no need to labour the effect of the verbal language: it’s witty, directed at a certain class of people (those who perhaps have been thinking of switching to a healthier tea, or those who want to do something for global warming), concise, fleeting and persuasive.

The words could probably carry this advertisement on their own, but they are articulated with, joined with, an image of the kettle in question. Words and image have the same stylish economy; the elegance of design; the simplicity. Probably, the image could not, in this case, carry the burden of the argument, nor fulfil the function of persuasion. In this case, the image appears to function as an illustration but also as a bit more than that: as an icon, as the object of desire. It could be said that the highlighting of a domestic image like this does give resonance to the kettle. It is framed in a particular way, photographed in isolation from its packaging, its kitchen counter, its users, its mains lead and thus given a prominence and life it does not usually have. It implies and suggests an argument, but does not quite deliver an argument in the Toulminian sense of a claim, or series of claims supported by evidence. But it *stakes its claim to be recognised* as worthy of consideration. It is, in a sense, a *proposition*.

But can the visual argue without the help of words? Consider a famous photograph from Melbourne in 1965 (see p. 20). It is an image of Jean Shrimpton at the Melbourne Cup. It has been used before (Black and Muecke, 1992) but here is re-interpreted in the light of the thesis on argument.

The suggestion here is that certain single, still images can embody an argument through the tension between two elements in the image. In this case, Shrimpton, in her state-of-the-art London look of 1965, is foregrounded against the background of the conventional race-going look for women in Melbourne at that time. Her very presence at the Melbourne Cup caused controversy in the Australian press: it was a provocation, a counterpoint, an invitation to do something not only about dress, but about the associations of femininity and womanhood implied by this particular dress. Shrimpton, both at the occasion and in the photograph, is the antithesis to the middle-class race-goers’ thesis – except that they did not realise they were the thesis until she came along. This

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is 'discussion with edge' of a cultural kind. Furthermore, the photograph is symbolic, not only of a moment in fashion and identity, but also of a pivotal moment in culture, suggesting a tension between constraint and liberation, propriety and impropriety, Melbourne and London at the time, and sets of values underpinning those positions.

There is an equally famous, or infamous case of two photographs alongside each other. The photograph, entitled 'Legs', is by Mike Wells shows two billboards in London, around the late 1970s, early 1980s. The one on the left is an



advertisement for Aristoc tights, and the other is a Christian Aid advertisement showing what appear to be an old man's withered and bony legs. Whether the two advertisements were deliberately juxtaposed by the advertising agency, or whether it was the photographer himself who framed and captured the irony of the contiguity, is not known. The point is that two images alongside each other, with similarities and, in this case, stark differences, set up a tension that appears to suggest argument. If the two images were to change places, there would be no significant difference in the proposition: that comparisons of this kind make one reflect on inequity, on the ravages of age, on the unfairness of where you were born and your lot in the world.

The suggestiveness and openness of the visual – its openness to interpretation, its refusal to be defined by words, its seemingly direct communication, its instantaneity – are contained to a degree by a *sequence* of images, where the *post hoc, propter hoc* principle comes into play. A well-established genre in this kind of visual argumentation is the photo-essay, often of a journalistic kind. Sometimes the photographs are accompanied by small or large captions or by a verbal essay, but the images can stand on their own and provide their own argument. In doctoral research with 12- and 13-year-olds (Andrews, 1992), using photographs to sequence narratives and arguments, students said that once they were committed to a narrative sequence it would change the narrative to change the sequence, but that it was possible to move the sequence around if the photographs were depicting an argument. This perception that the *post hoc, propter hoc* principle only goes so far in argument is a significant one, where an extra level of abstraction enables composition and re-composition of a sequence of particularities designed to convey the argument.

From the point of the photo-essay, it is an easy step to the multimodal slide sequence, as in Sam Strickland's *Engladesh* (2009), designed as a final submission for a Masters degree in photojournalism at City University, which combines sequences of photographs with music and some words, but with the images as the central spine of the narrative and arguments; and thence on to moving image: films, television, etc.

In summary, as far as visual argumentation is concerned, it is clear that images can be used as evidence for claims and propositions. In this role, they go beyond

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illustration to providing evidence in a court of law, as incontrovertible 'fact' in support of a thesis, or as a diagram of a process that is to be followed and that is based on a procedure that has been expressed verbally. But images can fulfil the function of claims and propositions themselves because of their multiple signification, and especially if they are juxtaposed with other images and/or they are set in a sequence that allows logical or quasi-logical connection. Their articulation constitutes an *argument* rather than merely persuading.

## Conclusion

Argument is important because it rehearses in public life the various sides to a problem or a point of dispute. Its very identification of the sore points, or the points of tension in a culture or an individual's emotional life, is the first stage of solving a problem. By drilling down at the point of dispute, which is what school and academic life at their best are very good at doing, the elements and dimensions of the tension and dispute are laid bare: their 'backing' revealed, the sets of values, theories and ideologies underlying their very characterisation made transparent, and the possibilities of reconciliation and 'moving forward' are laid out.

The next stage is the mapping out of those possibilities, the arguing for this plan of action or that plan; for selecting from a range of possibilities the best one – the one that marries short- and long-term objectives, the one that is for the greatest good of a community, an institution, a department, a nation, a personal life trajectory.

If we were to slow down the process of decision-making so that the lineaments of each micro-decision were made visible, as well as the more protracted passage of major decisions, we would see a process of argumentation at work. Helping young people, old people, people of indeterminate age to understand those processes, to give them power to challenge received ideas and generate new ones, to appreciate and compose arguments that are monomodal or in mixed modes . . . this is what education can do, and why I think that argument and argumentation have a very important part to play, not only in education,

but in the reasonable progress and renewal of social and political relations more generally.

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