

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

In one of our favorite *Monty Python* skits, a man, played by Michael Palin, enters a clinic and explains to the receptionist that he would like to pay for a 5-minute argument. The receptionist directs him to a room down the hallway. When he enters the room, he finds another man, played by John Cleese, sitting at a desk.

“Ah, is this the right room for an argument?” Palin’s character asks.

Cleese’s character brusquely responds, “I’ve told you once.”

“No, you haven’t,” says Palin.

“Yes, I have,” replies Cleese.

The back and forth continues for a few more seconds as Palin’s character becomes increasingly frustrated and eventually proclaims, “Look, this isn’t an argument! It’s just contradiction.”

Cleese’s character answers, “No, it isn’t.”

As the repartee continues, it evolves into an argument about the very definition of argument. Palin’s character asserts, “An argument’s not the same as contradiction.”

Cleese’s character rebuts, “Well, it can be.”

“An argument is a connected series of statements to establish a definite proposition,” Palin’s character continues.

Cleese’s character ripostes, “Look, if I argue with you, I must take up a contrary position.”

Palin’s character elaborates his position further. “Argument is an intellectual process. Contradiction is just the automatic gainsaying of anything the other person says.”

Just as time runs out, Cleese’s character offers up a final rebuttal, “No, it isn’t.”

We sometimes show this clip to our students and ask them to evaluate the quality of the argument that takes place between the two characters. Their responses vary, but for the most part what we find is that their understanding of argument is most closely reflected in the attitude of Cleese’s character. They generally think

of argument as an analog for debate or disagreement. While we certainly agree that debate and disagreement can sometimes be very effective classroom tools, we also try to honor the position that Palin's character emphasizes: Argument is not just debate and disagreement. It's a process—an intellectual process, a social process, a cultural process. Argument is reasoning. Argument is literacy.

*Think of five different arguments you've seen on TV or in movies. You might consider legal arguments from courtroom dramas, political debates on news shows, family disputes on sitcoms, or disagreements among co-workers. How are arguments typically portrayed in popular culture? Do they reflect the points of view of both characters from the Monty Python skit?*

**CONSIDER THIS**

Luckily, we're not alone in our appreciation for the value of argument. In recent years, literacy scholars have taken up the importance of argument as the basis for quality instruction in classrooms spanning grade levels and subject areas. Michael has previously written about the usefulness of argument as a way to address the Common Core State Standards for Language Arts (Smith, Wilhelm, & Fredricksen, 2012). Jon-Philip has designed and implemented an entire curriculum for college-bound high school students that is based on argument (Imbrenda, in press). Since the focus of this book is on providing teachers with ready-to-use lessons and activities, we're not going to get into a lengthy review of all the literature around the role of argument in secondary classrooms. Instead, we want to highlight and discuss briefly three primary reasons for teaching argument to all our students:

1. Argument cultivates critical thinking.
2. Argument fosters collaborative reasoning.
3. Argument promotes a sense of social responsibility.

Let's think about each of these goals in a little more detail.

## Argument Cultivates Critical Thinking

We make arguments every day of our lives. Whether we're choosing the best restaurant to eat at, the right smartphone to buy, or the podcasts we want to listen to on our commutes to work, we're taking into account many different factors and making a judgment based on how we evaluate those factors. We probably wouldn't refer to these everyday situations as examples of critical thinking. Most of the time these arguments take place internally, and the thought processes involved happen so fast we're barely aware of them.

Argument is not just debate and disagreement.

Argument is reasoning.  
Argument is literacy.

Critical thinking is about getting beyond “Here’s what I think,” and into the realm of “Here’s what I think. Here’s what makes me think that. And here’s why it matters.”

Yet we probably all know a few people who seem to go a step further when it comes to certain kinds of everyday decisions. People who are very tech-savvy and carefully compare products based on complex hardware specifications. People who are particularly mindful of the nutritional quality of the foods they eat. People who are keenly discerning about the kinds of media they choose to consume. They’re the people whom we go to for suggestions when we’re not so sure what we want. Jon-Philip’s brother, an engineer, spent nearly 2 months doing research before he purchased a new laptop. He compared dozens of pre-built models and even went a step further in comparing the specific components inside those pre-built models to decide if he wanted to go ahead and build one himself. His comparisons were richly informed by his expertise in the field of electrical engineering and by his understanding of the exact things he needed his laptop to be able to do effectively. We might be more inclined to refer to his decision-making process as an example of critical thinking because we have a clear sense of how his decision was influenced by information available to him and the deep knowledge needed to understand and interpret that information. In fact, part of what makes so-called critical thinking different from just plain old thinking is that critical thinking requires that we have some degree of awareness of what’s happening when we make decisions, consider evidence, generate interpretations, and act upon our judgments. Critical thinking is about getting beyond “Here’s what I think,” and into the realm of “Here’s what I think. Here’s what makes me think that. And here’s why it matters.” In this respect, we agree with Michael’s mentor, George Hillocks, when he argues that the kind of critical thinking we often champion as an essential goal of education is, in fact, sound argumentation (Hillocks, 2010). Simply put, thinking critically and arguing effectively are the same thing!

When we shift the focus of our instruction onto argumentation through lessons like the ones in this book, and give our students frequent opportunities to build arguments across a variety of situations, we’re cultivating the kind of explicit awareness of their own thinking that characterizes Jon-Philip’s brother’s meticulous efforts to select the best laptop computer. We’re helping them to move beyond their tacit judgments and into the deeper and often much more complex inner workings of those judgments. If we do so over time, we help our students become flexible and strategic in their academic lives. This kind of thinking becomes a habit, and with encouragement, they are able to transfer their new skills to the reading, writing, and range of other tasks they are frequently expected to carry out for school. We hope that the lessons and tools we present in this book will serve as good examples of how argumentation cultivates the kind of critical thinking we want our students to engage in on a regular basis in our classrooms—and will provide practice for your students to do the same. Our lessons are designed to teach students to carefully consider the knowledge and information available to them, while providing them with questions that are relevant to their lives both inside and outside of the classroom.

*While teachers widely agree that critical thinking is an important goal of learning, there is not always as much agreement around what we mean by the term critical thinking. What are your criteria for critical thinking in your classroom? How do your criteria compare with our criteria of thinking that involve explicit awareness of how we consider evidence, generate interpretations, and make judgments?*

**CONSIDER THIS**

## Argument Fosters Collaborative Reasoning

Much of what we just discussed in the previous section reflects fairly common understandings about the value of argument as in the development of individual learners. However, an equally valuable yet frequently overlooked aspect of argumentation is its inherently social nature. Newell and his colleagues (2011) proclaim the benefits of argument as a social practice carried out by groups of people across many different contexts as opposed to viewing it only as a reflection of an individual's cognitive ability. Such benefits are particularly important for us as educators to understand, as research has shown that the kinds of collaborative reasoning that characterize socially directed arguments can become powerful contributors to deep and meaningful learning (Clark et al., 2003; Nussbaum, 2008). Recognizing argument as a social practice helps us get beyond debate and disagreement and into the kinds of collaborative conversations that impact the world in important ways.

As a social practice, argument is paramount to the cooperative efforts of professionals in many fields. For example, Hagler and Brem (2008) examined the ways that professional nurses in critical care environments relied on argumentative reasoning to provide care for people with very serious medical conditions. Through ongoing series of polite informal exchanges of both information and interpretations of that information, nurses were able to combine their knowledge and expertise when reaching agreements about how to handle specific patients. This study is but one of many instances in which argumentative reasoning is shown to be central to the kinds of collaboration involved in people's professional lives.

Moreover, evidence has shown that students who participate consistently in collaborative arguments in the classroom can develop powerful habits of reasoning as they adopt the successful strategies of their peers (Clark et al., 2003). Students who struggled to generate effective arguments on their own showed tremendous improvement once argument was placed in the forefront of the social activity in the classroom. Much as the nurses in the critical care centers, students in classrooms became active participants in their own learning as they worked together to reach agreements. Due to its inherently social nature, argument bridges the

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important divide between the individual learner and the social dynamic of the classroom. We hope that the tools and lessons we present in this book will serve as good examples of how placing argument at the center of instruction can transform a classroom dynamic into one that is rich with talk and other forms of cooperative activity.

## CONSIDER THIS

*Can you think of a recent experience where you and one or more colleagues had to “argue” to come to a consensus around an important issue in your school? Did you think of what you were doing as an argument? Was the discussion ultimately beneficial?*

### Argument Promotes a Sense of Social Responsibility

In January of 2015 the Pew Research Center published a report on the findings from a study in which they examined Americans’ attitudes toward the importance of science and the value of scientific findings (Kennedy & Funk, 2015). They administered surveys to a representative sample of 2,002 adults and compared their responses to the responses of 3,748 members of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). What the report found is somewhat alarming: While Americans largely value the importance of science and believe that scientific endeavors should be funded by the government, they are far less likely to embrace the understandings that scientific research generates. For example, despite the fact that 88% of the AAAS scientists reported that genetically modified foods are safe to eat, 57% of the American public reported that they believed genetically modified foods to be unsafe to eat. In short, Americans like the idea of science, but they seem less willing to take scientific research into consideration when it conflicts with their personal values and lifestyle choices.

Why do we care about these findings, and what do they have to do with argument? Well, we’re concerned that studies such as this reflect a cultural phenomenon that is dangerous for our students. Large-scale efforts to evaluate students’ reading and writing have consistently shown that students at all grade levels struggle to reason carefully from evidence and data (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). Consistent with the implications of the Pew study, our students seem to be drifting into a malaise of anti-intellectualism and unwillingness to engage deeply and critically with the world around them. In an era where people have unprecedented access to information, our culture seems to be more willing than ever to remain complacent in its often-misguided assumptions.

If we view this as a strictly academic problem, then the previous two sections should hint at how argument can address that problem. But we don’t view it as a strictly academic problem. We view it as a social problem, though it’s a problem that involves education. Yet reform efforts such as the Common Core and other state

standards seem to have no explicit interest in confronting this social problem. The majority of standards focus on college and career readiness. But what about readiness for responsible citizenship? What about fostering the social conscience needed to assume important roles in the future of America? As educators, we're very much concerned with not just the colleges and careers our students matriculate into, but also with the kinds of people they become. We hope that the lessons and tools we provide in this book will demonstrate how our emphasis on argument also contributes to how students read and respond to the world around them, and how they develop identities as responsible members of society.

*Recently, concerns around the increase in so-called fake news have begun to permeate our classrooms. How do you help your students navigate the wealth of media that surround them? Can you think of a recent experience with a student or colleague that gave you some concern for how people determine what is truthful or accurate?*

**CONSIDER  
THIS**

## What This Book Can Offer

The chapters ahead are intended to serve as a resource for teachers who want to introduce argument into their classrooms. Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of the framework that guides our instructional approach and an explanation of a model of argument that has proved useful to us in our classrooms. In Chapter 3, we give detailed explanations of a few specific instructional tools that we have had great success with in helping students to approach reading, writing, and talking argumentatively.

Chapters 4–7 provide 20 ready-to-go, stand-alone lessons. Each chapter focuses on a different kind of lesson. Chapter 4 shares six lessons designed to introduce the model of argumentation by engaging in everyday arguments. Chapter 5 presents six lessons that focus more precisely on the three elements of that model. Chapter 6 comprises six lessons that focus in some way or another on textual analysis. Chapter 7 presents two lessons that require students to apply what they've learned to important life decisions.

We chose our lessons for a number of reasons:

- They illustrate a wide range of topics that promote argumentation.
- They demonstrate different ways of using some of our tools.
- They can stand as the basis for entire units or fit snugly into pre-existing units.

- They feature an array of different types of data from which arguments can be generated.
- They represent a diversity of argumentative contexts and situations.

As educators who have worked in many different environments, we deeply appreciate the many significant variations that characterize different classrooms, regions, school systems, and pedagogical approaches. With this in mind, we've also designed our lessons using a flexible format. While we will give suggestions as to how a teacher might want to implement our topics and tools, there is also a great deal of room for individual variation. Our lessons and tools can accommodate many different formats—full class, small group, peer-to-peer—as well as mediums for communication—talking, formal and informal writing, visual and multimedia presentations, etc. We want our materials to be as adaptable as possible.

Each lesson also includes examples of student writing we've collected through our work in a comprehensive urban high school. As you'll see, our students, like many in America, struggle with the complex kinds of reasoning we ask them to carry out, and with the many challenges that come with trying to communicate their ideas in writing. We chose the student work here not because it was representative of the “best,” but because it was representative of the range of students' struggles with the demands we placed on them and the high expectations to which we held them. Therefore, we've also included examples of how we might respond to each student's work in the hope that our efforts will prove insightful to teachers who will likely find that their students experience very similar struggles. And perhaps more importantly, we've added a few notes to make visible our own reasoning as educators who want to reflect on and improve our practice in response to the emergent needs of our students. We think of this as an example of how data can be used to drive instruction—a distinct kind of argumentative reasoning in itself!

Although the 20 lessons that we share provide a clear illustration of our approach and although we think that you could use them effectively with your students, we realize that 20 lessons do not a curriculum make. We'll close, therefore, with a brief discussion about how you might use the lessons as your year goes on.

**Notes**

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