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COMX 242.01: Argumentation

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COMM 242, Argumentation, Spring, 2014

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In a Nutshell

This course is designed to increase critical understanding of arguments and skill at argumentation. You will develop and practice argumentation skills through in-class debates and other assignments.

Course Goals and Philosophy

Argumentation occurs any time that people exchange reasons for adopting actions, beliefs, or values. Of course, argumentation comes into play whenever we talk about politics; for example, what we should do about Iran, health care, the environment, or the cost of education. In this class we will spend most of our time talking about political argument. However, the same basic process of argumentation applies when we exchange opinions and make decisions with other people at home, at school, in the community, or at work. Argumentation skills can help you participate more competently in the exchange of ideas and collective decision making in all facets of life.

Although many people shy away from argument because they find it uncomfortable or distasteful, being able to think critically about arguments and engage in constructive, issue-oriented debate is essential in order to make wise, well-informed collective decisions. Much of the argumentation that we see in politics and other areas of public life does not help us make good decisions, nor does it promote understanding of complex issues. For example, the arguments that we hear in political advertisements, public forums, or on the Oval are often exaggerated, tangential, unsupported, and based on personal attacks. In studying and practicing argumentation, we try to hold ourselves to a higher standard. A good argument should bring two sides closer together, not drive them farther apart.

One misconception about argumentation is that it is mostly about how to persuade other people; in other words, how to “win” arguments. It is important to learn to speak and write persuasively so that other people will consider your ideas. However, the main reason that we study argumentation is to make debate and decision making more informed, rational, and constructive.

Objectives

Early in the course we will work on analyzing arguments. This part of the course is designed to strengthen critical and analytic thinking. Later in the course, debates will be used to practice construction and refutation of arguments.

Specifically, in this course we will work on:

- learning to recognize the basic structure of arguments;
- critiquing different types of arguments;
- critiquing evidence and employing evidence appropriately;
- identifying the critical points of contention in a controversy and addressing these points systematically;
- anticipating and responding effectively to counter-arguments; and
- adapting to the flow of argument in a live debate.

You will learn to analyze arguments through class discussions focused on sample arguments, editorials, advertisements, and current controversies. You will also occasionally critique the speeches and debates of other students. You will learn to construct and refute arguments through debates and other assignments.

Course requirements

1. Exam. There will be one exam in mid-semester covering readings and lectures. The exam will assess understanding of basic concepts and perspectives on argumentation, as well as the ability to analyze and critique example arguments.
2. Debates. Everyone will participate in 4 in-class debates. You will sign up for two main debate topics – one for the panel debate and another for the cross-examination debates (which you will do twice). To prepare for debates on your main topic you will need to research the topic in depth. The remaining debate will cover a campus issue and will require only a small amount of out-of-class preparation.
3. Other assignments. When we get to the first debate (called a “panel” debate), you will turn in a *speech outline* and set of *evidence cards* after you are done speaking. A major part of your grade for the panel debate will be based on the outline and evidence cards. You will submit an *argumentative brief* before the cross-examination debate and evidence cards once you are done speaking. A brief is a condensed summary of the issues and key arguments associated with the topic.
4. Regular attendance and participation. Steady attendance is a requirement of the course. Regular attendance and participation are necessary to prepare for the debates and to have an attentive audience when people are speaking. Please arrange work schedules and other obligations so that they do not compete with the class. More than two absences will result in a grade reduction (with the number of points deducted based on the number of absences over two). In addition, you have to be in class on any day when you are scheduled to speak in order to get credit. Of course, I will show flexibility toward someone who misses multiple days for reasons that are truly unavoidable, such as an extended illness or family emergency. Please contact me by email if such a situation arises.

The maximum points for each assignment are:

- 70 points -- Panel debate (including outline and note cards)
- 20 points -- Practice debate
- 30 points -- Argumentative brief
- 40 points -- Cross-examination debate #1
- 40 points -- Cross-examination debate #2
- 100 points - Exam

There are a total of 300 possible points. Grades will be assigned using the +/- system.

Readings

All readings are on the course Moodle site. Read these in the order listed. There is no text to buy for this course.

“The nature of arguments,” from Rieke, R. D., Sillars, M. O., & Peterson, T. R. (2005). *Argumentation and critical decision making* (pp. 97-113). NY: Longman.

“Understanding fallacies,” from Inch, E. S., Warnick, B., & Endres, D. (2006). *Critical thinking and communication* (pp. 78-96). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

“Evaluating evidence,” from Herrick, J. A. (2007). *Argumentation: Understanding and shaping arguments* (pp. 71-81). State College, PA: Strata Publishing.

“Locating and Evaluating Sources of Evidence,” from Herrick (pp. 85-96).

“Arguing about policies,” from Inch, Warnick, & Endres (pp. 245-273).

Academic Misconduct:

Academic misconduct includes cheating, plagiarism, and fabrication of research. In this course the main potential problem lies with plagiarism, for example, basing a speech entirely on an article taken from the internet. We will address this when we discuss evidence. Depending on the severity of the violation, plagiarism will result in an “F” on the assignment, failure of the course, and/or recommendation of a University sanction.

Class Schedule (subject to revision):

| Date | Topic and Assignments |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Ja. 29 | Introduction and selection of debate topics |
| Ja. 31, Fe. 5 | Structure of arguments |
| Fe. 7, 12, 14 | Evaluation of arguments |
| Fe. 19, 21 | Case construction and debate preparations |
| Fe. 26 | Practice for panel debates |
| Fe. 28, Mar. 5, 7 | Panel debates |
| Mar. 12, 14 | Refutation and review |
| Mar. 19 | Exam |
| Mar. 21 | Demonstration debate by members of UM Forensics Team (tentative) |
| Mar. 26-28 | Debate preparations |
| April 2, 4 | Spring Break |
| April 9, 11, 16 | Practice debates (campus issues). |
| Ap. 18, 23, 25, 30 | Cross-examination debates |
| May 2, 7, 9, 13 (Tues., 3:20) | |