Teaching Step Ten: Engaging in Oral Arguments

Engaging in argumentation in written form is one thing – actually arguing with a real, live human being is quite another. In this step, students take the argumentation skills that they’ve learned and apply them to a dynamic engagement with a person who holds a different position than they.

It’s best to explain this step by explaining how the assessment for it will take place. Usually, if possible, I encourage students to undertake the assessment as a group, although it can be done individually if necessary. To pass this step, students must do the following:

* choose a topic;
* choose a position in relation to that topic;
* find a representative of a group which holds the opposite position to yours;
* make arrangements with that person to visit the class and debate the issue with you;
* research the topic in preparation for the debate; and
* debate the topic with your guest in front of the class.

This step includes all of the skills that have been worked on so far in this class (understanding, evaluating, and constructing arguments). However, it adds an ethical and personal dimension to the practice of argumentation; and for this step I am deeply indebted to Martin Fowler and his book *The Ethical Practice of Critical Thinking* (2008, Carolina Academic Press). Indeed, I would strongly suggest that students who reach Step Ten be required to read Fowler’s book in preparation for the debate. I will only summarize some of Fowler’s key points here.

When arguing with another person, logic and reason are crucial, but they aren’t always enough to guarantee a productive, engaging, and respectful dialogue. Indeed, sometimes logic can be used as a blunt instrument, with which one person bludgeons another into submission – hardly a recipe for learning and deepening of insight! Fowler’s book recognizes that argumentation is an activity that occurs only between and among human persons, and as such, has a distinctly ethical dimension.

Part of that ethical dimension has to do with the purpose of arguing. Fowler holds, and I agree, that arguing fulfills its highest purpose when it deepens all the participants’ understanding of a given matter. In other words, argumentation cannot be seen merely as a competitive sport, where the object is to “beat” the opposing team. Instead, it needs to be a way by which we understand our own positions and the world around us in a richer, more complex way.

Another part of the ethical dimension has to do with recognizing and respecting the humanity of all the participants. For the most part, the arguments encountered in real life are not produced by machines. They will be produced by actual persons, many of whom will hold positions radically different from yours. To engage well with people with differing views necessitates a recognition of the fact that reasonable people can have reasonable diversity in what they hold to be true and important.

Fowler terms arguments that uphold various ethical principles “sustaining arguments” – that is, arguments that sustain interest in the topic at hand, respect for the persons involved, and the health of the community in which such arguments take place. Unsustainable arguments threaten those same factors.

So how do we recognize a sustainable argument? Fowler indicates that sustainable arguments uphold the following principles:

* The Principle of Conflict. This may sound like a contradiction – but in fact, sustainable arguments are those that are honest about the ways in which the participants disagree. To be ethical is not the same as being nice. Indeed, to fail to be clear about precisely how a particular argument diverges from that of the other participants, even if that clarity creates feelings of discomfort, is to lack a basic respect for them and the practice within which all both engaging.
* The Principle of Scholarship. In order to argue well about a certain matter, a decent (although obviously not necessarily complete) grasp of the knowledge that has been produced about it is required. To argue about something about which you’re entirely uninformed is irresponsible and a waste of everybody’s time.
* The Principle of Charity. Arguing ethically with other persons necessitates refraining from misrepresenting their views. In the case where there is a lack of clarity about those views, the ethical arguer will always give the other participants the benefit of the doubt, and interpret their words in the most charitable and positive way possible.
* The Principle of Substance. Argument just for the sake of argument cannot possibly be sustaining. Individuals who engage in argumentation have an ethical responsibility to ensure that the topic *matters*, that it has some relevance to all involved. Otherwise, the argument is simply not authentic.

To pass this step, students must host a successful debate, wherein they demonstrate their ability to engage in argumentation that is not only logically sound but also ethically responsible. Of course, the guests whom they invite may or may not subscribe to Fowler’s theory of the ethics of argumentation (nor, for that matter, may they subscribe to basic principles of logic!). However, regardless of the behavior of the guest, students can demonstrate their own ability to help to frame, and then contribute to, a sustainable argument.

There is no doubt that this is a difficult assignment – which is why it’s the last one in this series of steps! Students often, upon having it described to them, despair of ever being able to do it. But I have had literally dozens of students present these kinds of debates, and while the students’ performances have been widely variable, each debate constitutes a significant learning experience. It is a challenge worth taking up!