Arguing: the point in English

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In 1984, six thousand New Zealand students from one hundred Year 8 and one hundred Year 11 classrooms wrote three pieces each as part of their participation in an IEA survey of student writing in 13 countries.

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As a persuasive writing task students at both levels were asked to choose and analyse a problem that they had a strong opinion about and to generate ideas in order to persuade or convince (Lamb, 1987). Compared to their performance in writing narrative, these students performed badly in argumentation.

Moreover, on the basis of their responses to a questionnaire, 58% of Year 8 (Form 2) students indicated that they had never written an essay on a problem in society and 65% had never described a problem and given a solution. With fifth-formers, the figures were 44% and 59 respectively. Hilary Lamb's report states bluntly: "Responses to the task questionnaire showed that 67% of form 2 students, and 54% of form 5 students were not familiar with writing to persuade someone." (p. 75)

Two years after the publication of her 1987 report, Lamb again reflected on the superiority of students' narrative writing over argument and reflection. In their persuasive or argumentative essays, she writes, "...a bald description of a problem, or the blunt declaration that there was a problem replaced argumentation, logic or persuasion." (Lamb, 1989, p. 3)

It would appear that New Zealand students are not alone in their difficulties with argumentation. As reported by Richard Andrews, research in England would appear to indicate that a rather small proportion of work in English classes (4.8% to 12%) is spent on argument and that concern at the inability of students in secondary of high schools to argue well, either in speech or in writing, is widespread. (Andrews, 1993)

Reflecting on the poor performance of New Zealand students at the argumentative task set, Lamb (1989) makes a number of

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references to what we might call the "lack of maturity" explanation. In a typical statement, Lamb writes that, "More complex tasks such as argumentative or reflective writing may be beyond the majority of students at this stage (12 years and 15 years) demanding a level of cognitive development which many students do not reach until aged 16 or more." (p, 3)

One problem with such an explanation of poor performance is that it can deflect attention away from some of the classroom practices identified in Lamb's original report — such things as the sparse attention given to argumentation, the amount of writing consisting of no more than simply copying and the lack of variety in teaching programmes. Another problem is that this explanation may be incorrect. Andrews (1995) argues forcefully against the notion that narrative is prior to the experience of and competence in argument and makes the point that argumentative exchanges can take place between children as young as 18 months.

If you couple the prevalence of a belief in argumentation as a later stage of cognitive development with a tendency by teachers to privilege narrative over argumentative written and oral forms (and fiction over

non-fiction), you have a recipe for a self-fulfilling prophecy — with argument marginalised on the basis of a belief which might have been challenged had classroom priorities and practices been different.

"...this article describes an approach to teaching argument developed over two years ..."

To compound matters further, the New Zealand English Curriculum (1994) reflected Piagettian assumptions that young children could not argue. Under the "Transactional Writing substrand, students at level 1 (supposedly years 1-3) are expected to "recount events". However, there is no expectation to "express and argue a point of view" until level 5 (supposedly years 8-12). In this respect, *ENZC* reflected its English and Welsh counterpart which reflected conventional and limited notions of the place of argument in the development of writing abilities. (Andrews, 1995)

In 1996, I was contracted by Macmillan Publishers to develop a set of units that might help teachers guide secondary students in an exploration and mastery of aspects of argument. The focus on argument was my own suggestion and was

made against the background just described. My thinking had also been stimulated by the work of Richard Andrews with students and teachers in the North of England (1992, 1993, 1995). The remainder of this article describes an approach to teaching argument developed over two years between 1996 and 1998, and a trial of the resultant materials undertaken by teachers in six Waikato secondary schools during the same period.

Some General Principles

Underpinning the development of the learning/teaching materials were a number of ideas or principles. These included:
- a rhetorical basis for unit planning
- the defining of genre within a rhetorical framework
- inquiry-based learning as an essential pedagogy.

The following assumptions are implicit in a rhetorical focus on language (Andrews, 1992: also Eagleton, 1983; Thomson, 1998):
- People construct texts with a view to achieving a desired result with a particular audience.
- Text is a product of function (Form follows function)
- Texts are generated by contexts. Social/cultural contexts call forth texts.
- All texts assume a kind of social complicity between producer and audience.
- The expectations of the participants in such acts of complicity become formalised in the conventions of genre.
- These conventions can apply to such language features as: layout, structure, punctuation, syntax and diction.
- In a rhetorical approach, literature is not devalued but revalued.

A rhetorical approach demands that we as English language teachers, view any text (as genre) as a purposeful act located in a network of relationships, immediate (as in M.A.K. Halliday's context of situation) and general (Halliday's context of culture). If we are asking students to focus on their role as

users of language, then we will be asking them to look very closely at the functions they will be wanting their text to serve. Of necessity, they will need to refine their view of their audience, consider such notions as pitch and presentation, and think through very carefully the purposes behind their writing. A rhetorical approach encourages language-based activities to be situated in such a way that the boundaries between the classroom and the world outside of school are dissolved. And if the situations have the potential for dramatic tension, so much the better!

The overall attempt to relate teaching and learning to a social situation with its diverse participants and conflicting interests allows for a dynamic understanding of genre as something far more adaptable and socially rooted than a series of prescriptive recipes. Such an understanding is more in line with the thinking represented by Peter Medway when he refers to genres as more than just text types but as typical rhetorical engagements with recurring situations. (Medway, 1994)

Finally, in developing the materials, I drew on pedagogical approaches associated with "action learning" or "inquiry-based learning". (Gawith, 1988; Wells, 1992; Buckley, 1994; Auerbach and Paxton, 1997; Grant, 1998.) Such approaches have in part been driven by the introduction of information skills in national curriculum statements around the world. But they have also been driven by a belief, corroborated by research, that student ownership of the learning process, the application of information skills strategies and the development of metacognitive awareness in students all help the learning process.

The most cogent treatment of inquiry-based pedagogy I have come across is a presentation by Gordon Wells to the Annual Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English in 1992 (Wells, 1992). In his paper, Wells related inquiry-based teaching to a view of

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meaning-making as something negotiated co-constructively between teachers and learners in the school setting. He viewed inquiry as driven by intense engagement, an initial curiosity that sometimes eludes clear formulation, a critical attitude towards information sources and the enjoyment of shared communication.

One of the outcomes of Wells' research was the development of a model or "suggested framework" for his "inquiry-oriented curriculum". The model has five steps and three major components: research, interpretation and presentation. In brief, these steps consist of:
- The launch: an initial activity that provides a starting point for inquiry
- Research: the gathering of relevant evidence and information
- Interpretation: "...making sense of the evidence that has been collected in terms of the question that is driving the inquiry."
- Presentation: where individual or groups share their findings with others
- Reflection: which can focus on one or both of the processes engaged in or the implications of what has been discovered.

The design of a resource

The teaching/learning materials first developed in 1996 consisted of eight units of work. Each used an investigative approach to involve students in an exploration of argument as a mode of discourse. In this section, I will describe two units of work which exemplify the approach taken. Teachers reading this publication may like to use the descriptions offered as a basis for

adopting the approach in their own unit design. For purposes of brevity, I will not be discussing the sorts of transformation the units underwent as a result of teacher trialling, though I will be detailing both teacher and student response to the approach in the next section.

Each unit of work had a similar structure:
- *Getting started*: Aiming to arouse student interest in the situation to be explored.
- *Focus for investigation*: Providing a focus for language-oriented investigation.
- *Investigating text*: Involving students closely with the close reading (or viewing) of texts as a way of addressing the aims of their investigation.
- *Drawing conclusions*: Inviting students to draw conclusions on the basis of their investigation.
- *Reflection*: Inviting students to reflect critically on some of the issues raised by their findings.
- *Producing text*: Inviting students to apply their learnings in the production of texts.
- *Exploring further*: Enabling students to apply and extend what they have learned through a variety of supplementary activities.

This structure is comparable to Wells' model summarised previously. It contains a launch and a data-gathering phase. The evidence is interpreted and presented in the "Drawing conclusions" phase. There is also a reflection phase. What is added is what might be called an application phase, where students use their learnings in the production of their own texts. What differs is the degree of

> *"The introductory activity used a letter to the editor..."*

teacher-directedness in the formulation of hypotheses.

Unit 1 was entitled "Introducing genre" and focuses on the various contexts within which people write letters, in particular letters to the editor. The introductory activity used a letter to the editor of *Cleo* magazine from a reader who felt that dog-owners who entered their pets in dog shows had been unfairly criticised as being cruel. The activity was used to orient students to the sorts of situations which give rise to such letter-writing and to have them begin using some fundamental language concepts such as *purpose* and *function*.

The "Focus for investigation" was the question, *Are there features all Letters to the editor have in common?* A number of *hypotheses* were suggested as worthy of investigation:
- The purpose of letters to the editor is the expression of opinion.
- The main function of letters to the editor is to persuade.
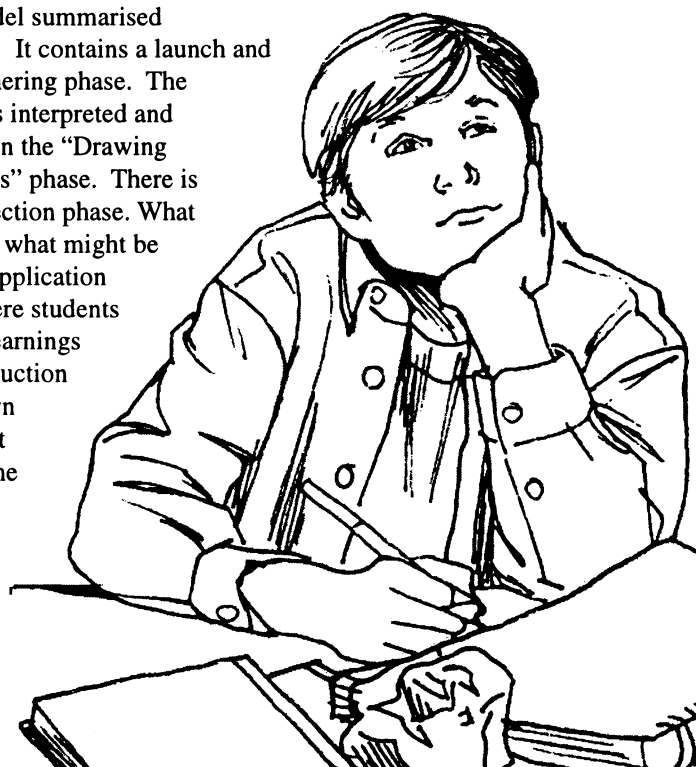
Hypotheses	Dolly letter	Tearaway letter	First example	Bulletin letter	Second example
Purpose: letters to the editor have the *expression of opinion* as their purpose.					
Function: the main function of letters to the editor is to persuad*e*					
Style: Letters to the editor are usually short pieces of paragraphed prose using formal diction					
Structure: Usually begin by referring to a topic of issue, stating a position, then going on to argue a case and giving reasons					

- Letters to the editor have a distinctive *style;* usually short pieces of paragraphed *prose* using *formal diction.*
- Letters to the editor have a consistent *structure;* they begin by identifying a topic or *issue,* then go on to argue a case justifying the writer's *position* and their reasons for it.

The language-related terminology students (metalanguage) students are expected to become comfortable using is italicised. It might be noted in passing that a focus on "genre" in the very first unit of work is quite deliberate. The term has become widespread since the publication of *English in the New Zealand Curriculum* (1994) and is a useful way of focusing on the way in which language is shaped by social use. The four hypotheses above, dealing as they do with purpose, function, style and structure, are in fact concerned with crucial elements in the construction of a genre.

In the "Investigating text" section, students have the process of matching hypotheses with findings modelled for them with respect to the *Cleo* letter. After a little detour in which students explore the concept of *formal* and *informal*

Unit 4 was entitled "Being a promoter – selling the school production"

language, students are given three more examples of letters to the editor (from three different sources) and are asked to find two examples of their own. After taking notes on each example to see whether they conform to the hypotheses they are testing, they record their findings in the sort of table illustrated above.

Once the data from their investigation are entered in tabular form, students are in a position to "Draw conclusions". To what extent are the hypotheses supported or not supported by the findings? Do the hypotheses need to be rewritten in some way? In general, what features might they now expect to find in most letters to the editor?

In the "Reflection" which follows, students are introduced to the concept of *genre* as a "...type of text with predictable features which can be described in terms of such things as the participants involved, purpose, function, structure, layout and style." The letter to the editor is a genre because it has recognisable

or predictable features. But how predictable? Students are asked to reflect on the extent of the variance between the examples they have studied and to come up with some explanations for this.

Finally, with the help of a sample layout, students "Produce text" by writing their own letter to the editor in response to one of the examples they have studied earlier. The unit is rounded off by a series of extension activities which allow students to "Explore further", for example, by conducting an investigation to see whether "school reports" can justifiably be described as a genre.

Unit 4 was entitled "Being a promoter – selling the school production". Unlike unit 1, it adopts a more purely rhetorical approach by having students simulate or even engage in a real life situation with participants with vested (and occasionally conflicting!) interests producing texts with specific purposes in mind. This unit focuses on a situation where students are in the role of promoters needing to "sell" a school event of some kind.

To "get them started", they are introduced to a *playbill*, produced by a Victorian theatre company to promote a production of *Hard Times*. (I was handed this

"resource" during a workshop at a conference in Melbourne in 1996.) They are asked to consider the purpose of this particular genre and to then brainstorm a list of genres that might be used to promote a school production or some other event. By revisiting the definition of argument they have tested in unit 2, the realise that promotion is a form of argument. They are also introduced to the concept of *target audience*.

The "Focus for investigation" here is the question: *How can a knowledge of argument help make the promotion of a production more effective?* The kinds of questions they will be addressing to various promotional genres as arguments are:

- What *form* does the argument take? Is it appropriate to the audience?
- Are the *issue* and the speaker's *position* both clearly stated?
- Is the presence of *alternative positions* recognised and addressed in some way? Is the argument developed in a logical way through a series of *connected statements?*
- Does the speaker back up claims with *well-reasoned evidence?*

At the start of the "Investigating text" section, students are given an example of a *speech at assembly* promoting a school production of *West Side Story*. Because the speech at assembly is an oral genre, it is presented with *prosodic features* bracketed and examples of body language are indicated by the use of bold italics. They are asked to assess it as an argument using versions of the questions listed above. They then conduct further analyses of other promotional genres, a *press release* and a *flyer*.

In "Drawing conclusions", students return to their focus question on the relationship between argument and effective promotion. As in unit 1, students do a comparative exercise, evaluating each of the three different genres they have studied in terms of their effectiveness as arguments and in terms of their promotional function.

In anticipation of the "Producing text" section, students then reflect on the promotional genres they have evaluated, this time in terms of the difficulties they might pose for producers of text and personalising this in terms of their own needs and goals as developing language users. For their production task, students choose one of three genres – a speech at assembly, a press release or a flyer (playbill). For each of these genres, students are guided through a three-phrase process involving orientation, preparation and production (or delivery). The following is an example of the process using the playbill as an exemplary genre.

1. Orientation
- Purpose: Is it primarily to inform people? Or is it to stun people with the amazing power of your graphics?
- Function: What can you do to make your written text both informative *and* persuasive?
- Audience: Where are you going to distribute your playbill? To Whom? What aspect of the show will appeal to them? Are there clues in your audience profile to help you choose graphic elements for your playbill?

1. Preparation
- Write a paragraph to sell the show. Make sure you use plenty of emotive and approbatory diction. Don't make it too long.
- Draft the written text part of your playbill. Make sure you incorporate all the essential information you need. (Can you think of some **incentives**?)
- Reflect on the way you've sequenced your information in your draft. Can the sequence be improved? Redraft.
- You will need one main image containing a really important idea from the show for your playbill. Brainstorm a number of possibilities and decide on one.
- Decide on the **composition** (the way the parts are arranged) of your playbill.
- Decide on the style of the lettering (typeface and point size) you are going to use in your playbill. Avoid using too

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many different typefaces and point sizes.

1. Production
- Compose your final draft on A4 paper (**landscape orientation**), preferably using a desktop publishing programme. Publish and distribute.

As with unit 1, unit four ends with a series of extension activities to enable students to "Explore Further".

Teachers and students respond

Teachers in six Waikato secondary schools trialled the units of work in their initial draft form in 1997 and in revised form in 1998. A classical description of the action research process views it as having seven cyclical phases:
- choose an issue
- investigate the issue
- analyse the situation
- plan the action
- act by using the plan and monitoring its effects
- evaluate the effects
- revise the plan and repeat the cycle.

In this instance, teachers were joining a cycle as users of a plan of action already fashioned for them by the writer. However, it was recognised that the *way* in which teachers made use of the materials would be determined by their *own* classroom planning. I made it clear that teachers should not feel imposed upon and that they should feel free to adapt the materials to the needs of their classes and the demands of their overall programme. A number of teachers kept logs in order to reflect on what worked and what didn't work and to make suggestions for changes. Others used questionnaires to gather students' responses to the material. The feedback which emerged by

the end of 1997 included the following:

- Teachers endorsed the need to guide students into an exploration of argument as a mode of discourse.
- Teachers liked the step-by-step structure of the inquiry and the way it drew students into making or testing hypotheses, especially since close reading was required in order to test these hypotheses. One teacher wrote: "This material is clearly set out in an almost 'lesson by lesson' approach. Minimal planning needs to be done in order to teach the genre. Students were encouraged to be independent thinkers and to challenge the predetermined features of the genre."
- Teachers reported that their students objected to excessive copying. The draft materials included grid-type organisers where students could record their findings. However, needing to reproduce these organisers was felt to be tedious and, again, a case was made for grid templates to be provided in a teachers' handbook.
- Teachers had mixed feelings about some of the terminology being introduced, and in particular, questioned the practicality of having students differentiate between language purpose and language function. One teacher wrote, "The terminology is unfriendly. What I mean is that you use words that are difficult to explain to students. This can frustrate me and the students. Examples: function, diction, prose...There are arguments for both sides on this one."
- Students enjoyed the use of transformation exercises, for example, as a way of exploring stylistic choices.

The following evaluations are typical of written responses from students in a third-form class (Year 9) in a co-ed secondary school participating in the project. These students had trialled Unit 1, "Introducing Genre".

- I enjoyed reading the slang/funny letters to the editor and trying to rewrite them formally. I liked arguing about my "sport is the best" and telling people that it was the best one. I did not like getting letters out of the paper and comparing them with others, but it was very good learning wise, I think. When writing letters to the editor our version, I knew lots more about writing formal letters. I now would be able to write a very formal letter.
- I thought this was informing and I learnt a lot about the structure of letters and letters to the editor and how to put forward an argument effectively. It was interesting learning the differences in formal and informal writing.
- I liked doing the letter about "Soccer is not a wimps sport". It was fun getting letters from the newspaper and sharing it with the class. The most fun was rewriting the letter to the Traffic Authority that had a lot of slang language and spelling mistakes. It's good to know the structure of a letter to the editor. I know how to write more formally now and also know how to give more

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What is noteworthy about these evaluations is the evidence of students beginning to use a metalanguage to reflect their awareness of their own language use, words such as "formal/informal", "structure", "evidence" and "statement.

As a result of this feedback, a number of changes were made in the teaching/learning materials prior to their being submitted to the publisher. In keeping with the strong recommendation of teachers, a "Teachers' Handbook" containing charts and organisers (to reduce "busy" copying), overhead transparency masters, teaching suggestions (including ideas developed by teachers during their trialling of the materials), notes on theory and additional classroom activities was produced.

One teacher's experiment with the revised material

In 1998, the revised material was made available to participating teachers. One of these teachers, Barbara Retemeyer (currently HOD English at Hamilton Girls High School), decided to trial unit 4 (described previously) with one of her classes. The students in this particular class were in their fourth year of secondary schooling and achieving at a lower level in English than the majority of their cohort. Some were recent immigrants with English as their second language.

This unit appealed to Barbara because it provided a flexible framework within a real, school-life situation and because it provided an opportunity for students to produce oral, visual and written texts. The unit allowed flexibility in the choice of play script and performance situation without diluting the language learning component. Because of the learning and confidence needs of her students, Barbara asked them to select plays from New Zealand School Journals which contain material written for lower reading levels. The students decided that their production would be aimed at an audience of lower

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primary school children and they worked on their promotion with this audience in mind. After some negotiation, the students substituted a school newsletter article for the press release.

Both the work the students produced and their end-of-unit evaluations showed they had gained confidence in oral language and achieved success at adapting their language and style to suit their audience and purpose, even though the unit highlighted the need for further development in particular language skills. One student wrote about her experience in this class:

• I achieved confidence in my speech when I was speaking. I think that I could use play promotional material in the future, promoting by using three different pieces of information....What I found most enjoyable would have had to be the flier. I like creating posters. The most piece of work I found difficult in is my speaking. I am very shy at times and can become uncomfortable because of that. Also my punctuation can get a little bit carried away sometimes.

In her concluding report, Barbara Retemeyer made the following comments:

• Participation in the trial showed me how opportunities for thinking critically, exploring language and the study and production of oral, written and visual texts can be integrated by using a rhetorical approach, with its focus on the communication demands of a particular real life situation.

• The experience enabled me to see that this approach evoked quite a different response from students than my former one, where they would write for the teacher, in a format prescribed by the teacher. They were empowered and motivated by an inquiry-based approach, where they were finding out for themselves about the language skills they would need to achieve their own purposes in the situation.

• My understanding of how I can use the concept of argument to develop my students' understanding of language and literature has been enlarged by working through the sample texts provided in each of the different genres. The guided close reading exercises helped me to provide students with a sound framework on which to base their own writing and speaking.

• It has been a revitalising experience for me to have another educator really interested in the process and outcomes of the work my students and I have been involved in. The trial has provided a valuable forum for classroom teachers and the resource has provided a focus for reflective teaching practice within that forum.

Looking ahead to publication

There is a case for letting Barbara have the last word as far as this article is concerned. But there is another aspect of this story that I want to mention, albeit briefly, to highlight a different kind of issue. That is the relationship between textbook writer (or resource developer), publisher and audience (teachers who purchase resources/students who use them). The project also became an opportunity for me to reflect on a number of related issues:

• Do we need student textbooks any more?
• If so, how should they be shaped?
• If so, to what kind of teacher should they be pitched?
• Can textbooks have a role in teacher development?

I've got my own ideas on this, but I'd like to leave the questions hanging for you (dear reader) to reflect on. But there is one poignant note I would like to end on. The publishing editor I worked with throughout this project is now working privately from home. The publisher, Macmillan, has decided to discontinue educational publishing in New Zealand. And the resource I've been describing here, to be published later this year under the title *For Argument's Sake: Exploring Language Transactions,* will be the last school textbook Macmillan publishes in this country.

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