

What if arguing is central?

Jean Goodwin

Iowa State University

goodwin@iastate.edu

In reviewing my college education, I experience a sort of double vision. Opening my student's eye, I see a darkish room in Swift Hall, where Mr. Smith (as I must call him) was leading a group of us exploring Religion in Western Civilization that autumn quarter in 1977. The window was mullioned; the table bulky. We were talking through Gilgamesh and his friendship with the "wild" man, Enkidu, reading from the orange volume of ancient near eastern texts.

I knew then with utter assurance that this work was the most important any of us could be doing. In particular, it was inconceivable that Mr. Smith could have any concerns to trump talking with us. The row of his graduate students—including some of those whose essays are collected here—off at the edge, observing in respectful silence, only reinforced this "of courseness"; as did the simple and expressive and not at all arrogant capitalization of the name of our enterprise: the College.

But I open now my teacher's eye, and see superimposed on the student view the rest of the campus blooming and buzzing all around. Yes, "Mr." Smith's being also Dean of the College (and Professor in the Divinity School, and in the

Division of the Humanities) did mean more than an office protected by secretaries, and troubles with getting an appointment. Those graduate students, not at all marginal, outnumbering us overall by three to one, were actually what we undergraduates were under.¹ And as for our talk, it had all been talked before, and the great conversations of a great research university more than drowned it out.²

With both eyes open, I can only wonder at the immense labor it must have required to keep up the appearances, or as Smith himself says more bluntly, the lie,³ that was the College. Our class activities were about as real as the neo-

¹ "By the sixties, most liberal arts colleges became, despite the earlier and still lingering rhetoric, preprofessional endeavors of unprecedented proportions as they came to see one of their chief functions to be the preparation of their students for the vocation of being graduate students, for entrance, despite the actual plans of the vast majority of their students, into the academic profession. Collegiate education was shamelessly transformed into *undergraduate* education." Jonathan Z. Smith, "The New Liberal Arts," *International Journal of Social Education* 1 (1986-87): 7-17, 9; see also "Re-forming the Undergraduate Curriculum: A Retrospective," in *Re-forming the Undergraduate Curriculum: Invitation to Dialogue; Inaugural Papers from the Academic Forum*, ed. J.W. Reed (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 1-21, 7.

² Indeed, the new Dean's most immediate problem was to keep the talk going at all by luring senior faculty into teaching undergraduate, and especially Core courses; Jon Meyersohn, "New Dean Smith will Evaluate Core, Independent College Funds," *Chicago Maroon*, July 1, 1977, 1, 5.

³ Smith identifies two sorts of pedagogical lying: the necessary lies of the introductory course, and the complex apparatus of lies that constitutes scholarly disciplines. About the former, he writes harshly: "In introducing a college student to what is usually termed a disciplinary framework, we have, at first, to disguise the problematic. We have to act and speak as if our informed guesses are more grounded in the way things are than is the case. Thus every course,

regardless of format, functions as a survey. It teaches the student what words are important and how to pronounce them. The words, the objects displayed, are taken as if they were self-evidently significant. We conceal from our students the debates and uncertainties that lie behind such judgments—indeed, we largely conceal from them the fact that self-evidence is always a field-specific judgment. We traditionally screen from our students' view the hard work that results in the production of the exemplary texts, items, and problems on display—indeed, we treat these sources as found objects, hiding, for example, the immense editorial labors that conjecturally established so many of the texts routinely taken as classics (not to speak of the labors of translation), and read them with students as if each word were directly revelatory. In some courses, we also gloss over the history of failed experiments and sheer serendipity that underlies the laws and models we present to our students as inevitable. In enculturating courses, we treat theory as fact. . . . [We lay] on them the fake ethic of originality (one that is already inappropriate at the Ph.D. level and sheerly ludicrous at the collegiate)." "To Double Business Bound," in *Strengthening the College Major, New Directions for Higher Education*, 84, ed. C.G. Schneider and W.S. Green (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 13-23, 20-21; see also "'Narratives into Problems': The College Introductory Course and the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56 (1988): 727-39, 736 and "The Necessary Lie: Duplicity in the Disciplines," January 20, 2000, <<http://teaching.uchicago.edu/handbook/tac12.html#smith>>. Although "we sometimes cheerfully call the lie words like 'generalization' or 'simplification,' but that's not really what we're doing. We're really lying, and lying in a relatively deep fashion, when we consistently disguise, in our introductory courses, what is problematic about our work." "The Necessary Lie." The latter, disciplinary lying, is best where the lie is transparent even to students—that is, where the lie becomes a joke, an initiation. "The Necessary Lie;" "Double Business," 22; see also Association of American Colleges, *The Challenge of Connecting Learning: Project on Liberal Learning, Study-in-Depth, and the Arts and Sciences Major* (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 1990), 11-12. Both sorts of pedagogical lying could be taken as specific instances of a general conception of education as training for judicious world-fabrication: "The world is not 'given.' It is not simply 'there.' We constitute it by acts of interpretation. We constitute it by speech, and by memory, and by judgment. It is by an act of human will, through projects of language and history, through words and memory, that we fabricate the world and ourselves. But, there is a double sense to the word *fabrication*. It means both 'to build' and 'to lie.' Education comes to life at the moment of tension generated by this duality. For, though we have no other means than language for treating with the world, words are not,

Gothic architecture and faux Tudor furnishings of our classroom. But why work to create such a dizzying double vision? Why not settle for single vision?—single vision being so much cheaper to keep up. My current institution, for example, doesn't waste time lying to its students (not in that fashion); it gives them forthright reminders of their inconsequentiality in the way it structures classes and programs. The College lie must have been costly, and not only in faculty time. Religions and civilizations had to be hacked down to the singular to get them into a course title, fifty centuries of history constricted into thirty hours of instruction, and the real issues of the subject mangled to find topics for a conversation with sophomores to fill any one of them.⁴ For what end was all this lying crafted and maintained?

after all, the same as that which they seek to name and describe. Though we have no other recourse than to memory, to precedent, if the world is not to be endlessly novel and, hence, forever unintelligible, the fit is never exact, nothing is ever quite the same. What is required at this point of tension is the trained capacity for judgment, for appreciating and criticizing the relative adequacy and insufficiency of any proposal of language and of memory." "The Aims of Education," in *The Aims of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago College, 1997 [orig. 1982]), 225; see also "Playful Acts of Imagination," *Liberal Education* 73.5 (Nov/Dec 1987): 14-20, 16; "Why the College Major? Questioning the Great Unexplained Aspect of Undergraduate Education," *Change* 15.5 (Jul/Aug 1983): 12-15, 15.

⁴Compare this with the "lying" description of the same course he directed to entering students: "What shall I teach a week from Tuesday in my course, designed primarily for freshmen and sophomores, entitled 'Religion in Western Civilization?' What shall I do in thirty hours? What shall we accomplish with students for whom this is a one-shot only course on my subject matter? If I go chronological, if I seek to include everything of importance since the third millennium, I will have less than ten minutes a century. If one of you has to go to the men's or ladies' room, you stand in grave danger of missing the Reformation!

One approach to this question is to reframe it in personal terms, and ask what I, on the receiving end of the lie, ended up with. Undoubtedly, I'm tempted to do this from considering myself one of the College's model productions.⁵ But even assuming modesty, I might pursue this line of thinking with a sentiment like the "anxiety of influence," only turned upside down—what could be called a despair over replicability. Examined with my teacher's eye, the assertion that college education has any intended effect on students seems dubious. Even a sample as small as $n=1$ (i.e., me) would demonstrate the possibility of *teaching*—that is, teaching which produces learning, as distinguished from the teacher's dutiful coverage of her subject,⁶ and from all the learning students achieve untaught.

Rather I must find texts and examples that will connect with things you already know: examples that are so basic that you can apply them to new things you will encounter as you go on; examples that are capable of bearing the burden of being general. So we will not begin chronologically, or with a survey of the teaching of each religious tradition, or with summaries of their scriptures. Rather we will reflect on the fact that every Western religion had its birth within a city. We will think about the relationship of religious life to urban life." "To the Entering Students" (Sept. 17, 1977), p. 3.

⁵ As usual: for in defining liberal education "we can all point to ourselves." "Reforming," 3; see also "New Liberal Arts," 7. But I am urged to caution by the warning that "administrators and professors [must] tear themselves away from unexamined assumptions and sentimental journeys to their own undergraduate years." Commission on the Baccalaureate Degree, *Integrity and the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges, 1985), 32.

⁶ Coverage? "Ludicrous" says Smith, "Narratives," 728; or more mildly, "no longer possible," *Integrity*, 27, and not enough, *Challenge*, 6.

What did I end up with? The habit of asking about where I was ending up, for one thing. This was a question posed almost obsessively within the College. Dean Smith had raised it when greeting us entering students at the beginning of the 1977 school year, reminding us to "keep asking ourselves, 'Why are we here?' 'What is this 'here' at which we are?'"⁷ It was thrashed out the next year in meetings of his seminar devoted to "The Idea of a College," which I recall chiefly for leaving me exasperated with my fellow students. And there was always the perennial topic for over-pizza discussion: "What is a Liberal Education?"

Now, it would be clever if the most central task of the College was indeed to get students to think about what they were doing there—it would be an instance of the "key to the treasure is the treasure" motif. But as useful as this training could be to those of us who remain tangled within the academy,⁸ I suspect the true end of the College should be sought outside.⁹ So: What else?

⁷ "To the Entering Students," p. 1.

⁸ The Dean's seminar in particular turned out to be good preparation for still-exasperating committee meetings thrashing out analogous questions (phrased in the local idiom of "outcomes assessment" and "curricular goals"), and leading to thoughts like: "When my colleagues tell me that curriculum is not something they are interested in or that there is too much talk about it, I cannot but wonder whether they are simply asserting that they have not thought about education, that they are but humble workers in the vineyard who rely on others to design and direct the enterprise, or that somehow they think they *are* the curriculum." Charles Wegener, *Liberal Education and the Modern University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 139.

⁹ Thus Smith urges us to always remember that we are making college a home for students so that they may *leave* it; *Challenge*, 5, 12, 14. We forget this when we

I ended up knowing a bit about Inanna. I can't say that has turned out to be more than a curiosity,¹⁰ so far.

I ended up being able to read—or better, see—the crafting of space and time in texts. That's been useful, and a consistent source of pleasure; but it hardly seems worth enough to justify the lie.

So if not specific knowledges, or specific skills, perhaps there's something larger to be found in the following experience, one of the most memorable of my College years. It occurred at the end of that fall quarter in Religion and Western Civilization. Our assignment, to my student's eye, was to say something interesting about the Book of Proverbs. That was wicked of Mr. Smith, since he did not tell us that there was nothing "intrinsically interesting" about Proverbs.¹¹ I now suspect that the assignment was an apparently innocuous (or lying) version

take the college major to be a mini- or pre-graduate degree; see n. 1 supra, and "Double Business," 16, "Entering Students," 3, "Playful Acts," 14-15, "Aims of Education," 222. About this tendency, Smith comments, again harshly: "It is not the careerism of our students that has disfigured liberal learning, but our own, and that of our colleagues." "Questioning," 15.

¹⁰ On liberal education as the accumulation of a sort of intellectual cabinet of curiosities, see "Playful Acts," 16 and "Aims of Education," 227-28. In this view, we endure being educated "in order to learn a smattering about each to enliven future cocktail parties, or to make us better consumers of the evening's news," "Aims of Education," 230, "Playful Acts," 17; or put otherwise, in the interests of "the civilized art of gossip," "Re-forming," 4; see also "New Liberal Arts," 8, "Aims of Education," 221.

¹¹ "I have worked for more than twenty years as a student, teacher and scholar of the Bible. Little of it strikes me as intrinsically interesting and valuable." "What is a Classic?" (Chicago: Chicago Program in Continuing Education, 1980), 8.

of his long-standing threat to make us interpret the Manhattan telephone book. In any case, I went home and spent the weekend typing out about half the text on my manual typewriter, cutting up the typescript into slips with individual verses, and piling the slips together according to all sorts of organizational principles. At some point, on the second or third day, one verse began to stick out. It had two heavy words in it: one literal, one figurative. It occurred to me that if I read the literal word figuratively and the figurative word literally, that could be interesting. In particular, it would make the verse look like something else we'd read about in this book, back at the beginning of the term. This verse with these words pointed to another and another, and soon a coherence sorted itself out of the slips of paper scattered across the floor. Cool! Well, there were some slips left over, but I thought it mostly worked (plus I hoped Mr. Smith wouldn't notice). So I wrote the whole up, plugged in the slips, titled the paper modestly, "Wisdom," and turned it in. Handing it back at next quarter's first class meeting, Mr. Smith asked me to read it aloud; that was surprising. At the end, he inquired whether I actually believed my interpretation. That also came out of the blue! Of course not, I replied; which by luck appeared to be the right answer.

Opening again my teacher's eye, there look to be several ways of redescribing what that student did and what could have been taught through the doing. I am struck, for example, by the bodily re-enactment of several categories from Bloom's well-known taxonomy, designed for describing the learnings of an

earlier generation of College students: the cutting-up analysis and piling-together synthesis. But instead let me turn to Smith's own language. His immediate comment on the paper read as follows:

This is by far the most imaginative, well argued paper that I have seen for the class. Whether or not your hypothesis is correct is of little account—you have proposed one & used it to make an *interesting interpretation* of the full range of assigned material.

Smith elaborated several of the key terms here in his published work on teaching over the following two decades, so we can follow them out.

Start with the italicized "*interpretation*." Because the text itself was uninteresting, the assignment highlighted the need for the student herself to make something of it. Indeed, what was required was the making of an interpretation to the point of making one up—a "playful act of imagination."¹² Given few cues about how to do this, the student, by default or desperation, was pushed to craft an *interpretation* that was a *translation* of the textual fragments into a disciplinary

¹² "Something primarily 'gladsome,' something like 'having fun,' more particularly that sort of fun associated with the intellect and its all-but-limitless capacity for the analogous activities of experimentation, argumentation, imagination, and 'fooling around.'" "Playful Acts of Imagination," 14. Thus "what we celebrate, above all, as educators are acts of imagination in the sense stipulated by Wallace Stevens when he wrote, 'Imagination is the power of the mind over the possibility of things.'" "New Liberal Arts," 17. See also Smith on making up the world, n. 3 *supra*.

language that had been offered in the course.¹³ If the result was *interesting*, it was because student had invested herself in it.¹⁴ But having put herself thus at risk, she became *responsible* for what she had done.¹⁵ And part of this

¹³ The basic act of imagination/interpretation is according to Smith always a translation of the "enigmatic signs" of the other "into our language as best we can." "Playful Acts," 15. In particular, translation into the local dialect is a key aspect of disciplinary lying; see the references in n. 3 *supra*. The liberal arts thus support something like the contemporary "distribution" requirements in order to encourage students to become aware of and responsible for the *choices* of disciplinary vocabulary that are always being made; such interdisciplinarity requires "the sustained labor of asking what one 'thing' might be if talked about in terms conventionally understood to be appropriate to another." "The Idea of the University, Take One: On the Genius of this Place" (Nov. 8, 2000), <<http://iotu.uchicago.edu/smith.html>>; see also "Aims of Education," 226, 230.

¹⁴ Thus Smith proposes one "fundamental test" for any course: "is it interesting?" "To the Entering Students," 4. Following up the implicit banking metaphor, Smith offers a definition: "things that are 'interesting,' things that become objects of interest, are things in which you have a stake, things which place you at risk, things which are important to you, things which make a difference." "Aims of Education," 228; see also "Playful Acts," 16-17, "Narratives into Problems, 734," "Double Play: Socrates' Apology and the Study of the Humanities," in *Engaging the Humanities*, ed. Ph. Desan (Chicago, University of Chicago College, 1995), 57-60, 58.

¹⁵ Responsibility for the consequences is an element of every decision about interpretations, according to Smith; "Questioning," 15, *Integrity*, 27. A primary aim of liberal education is thus to produce "individuals [viz. citizens] who know not only that things are often more complex than they may first appear but also that, therefore, interpretative decisions must be made, and that such decisions entail real consequences for which one must take responsibility; individuals who have been encouraged to refuse to flee from responsibility by the dodge of disclaiming expertise." "To the Entering Students," 3; see also "Aims of Education," 225, "Playful Acts," 17, "Liberal Arts for Citizenship," *The Center Magazine* 14.1 (Jan/Feb 1981), 63-64, 63.

responsibility was to voice her interpretation to others: to take it *public*.¹⁶ This act of publication brought to her awareness that her interpretation had limits, that it left things out, and thus that something *different* could be said.¹⁷ To meet this differences she had to go beyond just expressing her view; she had to build a structure of evidence to support it. In sum, she had to make an *argument*.

¹⁶ "An important value of liberal learning [is] bringing private percept into public discourse. . . . The coherence of a culture [including an academic culture] well may lie in its refusal to allow differences to remain incoherent and inarticulate." *Connecting Learning*, 13; see also "To the Entering Students," 3, "Liberal Arts for Citizenship," 63, "Narratives into Problems," 733-734, "Aims of Education," 228 and "Idea of a University."

¹⁷ There is never a single interpretation: the world can always be made up in multiple ways; see the references in n. 3 supra. Thus "collegiate education depends on, and trains for, the capacity to assume, simultaneously, differing points of view in order to engage in the interpretative enterprise and to reach some consequential decision," "Playful Acts," 20; see also "Idea of a University." And this training, in turn, requires "a collegial setting rather than a process of appropriation and indoctrination" in order to force a "recognition of the *conflict* of interpretations," "Commentary on William J. Bennett's *To Reclaim a Legacy*," *American Journal of Education* 93 (1985): 541-46, 545 (emphasis added); see also on conflict "New Liberal Arts," 14 In the anecdote I have recounted, it is apparent that Smith indeed expected the awareness of conflict to arise from the student's publication of the paper to her fellows. But in this case at least, this strategy didn't work, as evidenced by the student's surprise at the request to publish and by the fact that (in my memory) her fellow students did not reply with "examples, interrogations, challenges, or rival proposals," "Double Business," 21. On other hand, Smith may have underrated the significance to the student of publishing her work to "*Mr. Smith*," since that had been sufficient to provoke in her a (guilty) awareness of what she wasn't saying. If so, it was a second wicked act when Mr. Smith ended his comments on the paper as follows: "A+. This is one of three such grades I have given in the past 10 years in the college." Whoa! I wanted more of that good stuff, and eventually I'd be driven back to school to get my fix.

We end then with this one term, "argument," enfolding all the others: "interpretation, imagination, translation, interest, responsibility, public, difference." So let us guess that it is this term which justifies the College lie; that "*education is argument about interpretations.*"¹⁸

As a hypothesis, education as argument is at least plausible in assigning to college a work both distinctive and necessary. Argument appears at the intersection between reasoning and difference.¹⁹ Reason, although not a major theme in Smith's writings on education,²⁰ is among the conspicuous commitments

¹⁸ Emphasis in the original, "Aims of Education," 226; see also "Questioning," 15, "New Liberal Arts," 14, *Integrity*, 28. In other words: "it is argument that marks the distinctive mode of speech which characterizes college. This faculties need to remember, this students need to know." "Playful Acts," 16; see also "Double Business," 18, "Narratives into Problems, 728-29, "Idea of the University."

¹⁹ E.g., Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), chap. 3; Ralph Johnson, *Manifest Rationality* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000), chap. 6; Trudy Govier, "Reasons Why Arguments and Explanations are Different," in *Problems in Argument Analysis and Evaluation* (Dordrecht: Foris, 1987), 158-176; James B. Freeman, *Dialectics and the Macrostructure of Arguments: A Theory of Argument Structure* (Berlin: Foris, 1991), chap. 2.

²⁰ This absence is especially striking in the work of a scholar who theorized myth and ritual, even "primitive," as ways of thinking. The gap may be due to the relatively dismal level of early work on reasoning, as is suggested by Smith's comments about the "critical thinking" requirement instituted in the California system: "while the impulse is to be honored, one can only shudder at its formulation," "Re-forming," 22. Smith also harbored doubts about "the plausibility of generic," that is, field-independent, "argument and omnipurpose, omniscient writing and reasoning capacities," which might have lead him to avoid "reason" talk with its possibly universalizing connotations; "Narratives into Problems," 731; see also "Double Business," 18.

of the academy in which the college finds its home. Difference, as Richard Light's interviews remind us,²¹ is among the most powerful experiences a college offers its students. But students do not come to college already equipped to use reasoning to engage difference. One recent study found that only about a third of Americans are consistently able even to frame a hypothesis about an important public issue different from their own, and only about half of those to go on to construct an argument for the alternative view.²² Few seem to speak argument as their mother tongue.

So what if we take arguing as central to college education?—what should we do next? One thing we'll need is a better understanding of the ways of argument. I'm not thinking here of tips and tricks for getting students to argue better, though doubtless these are useful, at least for the tip or trickster. Instead, we need to heed the call made by Smith himself (and others) to professionalize our work of professoring, and think what we do.²³ We have here to start with a

²¹ Richard J. Light, *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), chap. 8.

²² Deanna Kuhn, *The Skills of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²³ "Bluntly put, we have as solemn an obligation to 'keep up' with the literature and research in education and learning as we do in our particular fields of interest and research. *No one* should be permitted to teach an introductory course who is not conversant, among other matters, with the literature on the cognitive development of college-age individuals, with issues of critical reasoning and informal logic, and with research in reading and writing instruction. . . . While there is surely art in teaching, it is, above all, a skilled profession," "Narratives

few words: at the center, "argument," and also "difference, public, responsibility, interest, translation, imagination, interpretation." If we are going to take arguing as central, we will have to be able to say *more*.

This need to say more is good news to me, personally, since having started a student back in Religion and Western Civilization, I have now turned out a student of rhetoric with a particular interest in argumentation theory. For there is such a venture as argumentation theory, the work of a loose interdisciplinary network spread out between logic (formal and informal), political philosophy, rhetoric, ethics, artificial intelligence, linguistic pragmatics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, composition studies, social psychology, etc. If the rest of the academy is going to put argument first, I and my colleagues in argumentation studies can undoubtedly look forward to full employment

into Problems," 730; see also *Integrity*, chap. 6; "Here and Now: Prospects for Graduate Education," in *New Humanities and Academic Disciplines: The Case of Jewish Studies*, ed. J. Neusner (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 33-45, 37-38; "Symposium on the Academic Vocation," *The Cresset* 48 (Sep, 1985): 8-10, 9. This is related to Smith's view that a course or curriculum is just as much a fabrication as any other activity. "*There is nothing that must be taught*," "Narratives into Problems," 728; see also "Aims of Education," 224, "Questioning," 14. What this situation requires of us are "greater acts of imagination," "New Liberal Arts," 11. And what it imposes on us is an "utter accountability" for the choices we make, "Re-forming," 21; see also "Liberal Arts for Citizenship," "Questioning," 15. On the "scholarship of teaching" generally, see Ernest L. Boyer *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1990) and Pat Hutchings and Lee S. Shulman, "The Scholarship of Teaching; New Elaborations, New Developments," *Change*, 31.5 (Sep/Oct 1999), 10-15.

That is, if we argumentation studiers have anything helpful to say about the terms "argument, difference, public" and so on. Oddly, however, leading theorists of argument seem have struggled most of all to abolish just these words, and especially the word "difference." The purpose, goal or function of argument in the dominant theoretical view is to *resolve* differences of opinion.²⁴

Arguments, it is supposed, transform dissensus into consensus, disagreement into agreement, matters at issue into common grounds. Argument is thus conceived as a "self-consuming" form of talk, devouring the parent which gave it birth. The end of arguing is to end arguing.²⁵

²⁴ To note only a few leading theorists from a variety of disciplines on argument as "rational resolution" or "rational persuasion": Douglas Ehninger, "Debating as Critical Deliberation," *Southern Speech Journal* 24 (1958): 22-30; Jurgen Habermas, "Deliberative Politics: A Procedural Concept of Democracy," in *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. W. Rehg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 287-328; Frans H. van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst, *Speech Acts in Argumentative Discussions* (Dordrecht: Foris, 1984); Johnson, *Manifest Rationality*. I suspect that the vision of a time when all arguments come to rest runs deep in our imagination. Hints of it turn up in the "aims of education" literature as well; for example: "We must have faith . . . that understanding will minimize the areas of disagreement and moderate the passions of those who disagree. A common training that leads to a common understanding would appear to be the most promising foundation of a community of any kind. Hence our democratic ancestors established the common schools," Robert M. Hutchins, "The Idea of a College," in *Engaging the Humanities at the University of Chicago*, ed. Ph. Desan (Chicago, University of Chicago College, 1995 [orig. 1950]), 87-94, 93. It's worth contrasting this with Smith on community as articulated disagreement, n. 16 supra.

²⁵ An irony pointed out by G. Thomas Goodnight, "Controversy," in *Argument in Controversy: Proceedings of the Seventh SCA/AFA Conference on Argumentation*, ed. D.W. Parson (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1991), 1-12.

Now, there are a variety of problems with conceiving argument as a way of resolving differences. Among other things, it flies in the face of much of our actual practices. Not only do our arguments seldom result in resolution, they appear seldom even to try.²⁶ Theorists holding the common view reply that they are elaborating argumentative ideals, not argumentative reality. But then we have to wonder: why are these theorists so uneasy with disagreement, that they place its elimination among their first principles?

It's hard not to suspect these argumentation theorists of having a profound distrust of argument—indeed, the same distrust that prevails in the culture at large. George Lakoff has traced in detail the bonding of argument with war implicit in our way of speaking: positions are attacked and defended, arguments are won and lost.²⁷ Other studies have documented a widespread view of argument as leading to violence, or as a pointless expenditure of energy, generating more heat than light.²⁸ There are many signs that this background

²⁶ This is especially conspicuous in civic affairs. For example, the party system imposes penalties on those who change their minds, and debates of the "Crossfire" genre appear to encourage an increase in disagreement.

²⁷ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), chap. 15.

²⁸ Pamela J. Benoit, "Characteristics of Arguing from a Social Actor's Perspective," *Argument in Transition: Proceedings of the Third Summer Conference on Argumentation*, ed. D. Zarefsky, M.O. Sillars, and J. Rhodes (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1983), 544-559; Darrin Hicks, "A Descriptive Account of Interpersonal Argument," in *Argument in Controversy: Proceedings of the Seventh SCA/AFA Conference on*

view has been absorbed into scholarship. Deborah Tannen's popular book *The Argument Culture*²⁹ shares the conception of argument as violent, contentious, adversarial, divisive and generally in need of her reform. Similarly, the disproportionate scholarly absorption with the ways of bad arguments (i.e., fallacies) evidences a uneasiness about argument's forcefulness. And the vast theoretical enterprises trying to impose rules on argument suggest an underlying fear that the practice is unruly.³⁰

So can these or other theoretical projects aiming to civilize argument help us conceive arguing as central to college? An idealizing conception might indeed be a useful rhetorical ploy for getting through to students: the ploy of the whitewash. It's clear enough that many students come to us thinking arguing is bad. Gerald Graff expresses our common experience:

For many students, the very word "argument". . . conjures up an image not of spirited conversational give and take, but of acrimonious warfare in which competitors revile each other and make enemies yet rarely

Argumentation, ed. D.W. Parson (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1991), 167-174, Robert Trapp, "The Role of Disagreement in Interactive Argument," *Journal of the American Forensic Association*, 23 (1986): 23-41.

²⁹ Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue* (New York: Random House, 1998).

³⁰ See Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst, *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies: A Pragma-Dialectical Perspective* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1992) for an example of both fascination with forbidden arguments and the promulgation of ten commandments.

change each other's minds. Disputes end up producing winners and losers or a stalemate that frustrates all parties; either way they are useless except for stirring up bad blood.³¹

If we can paint for our students a dazzling vision of argument as a cooperative, consensus-producing conversation, we might be able to cover up the painful reality, with all its mixed emotions and loose ends. That might be a good lie.

Leaving aside the ethics of a whitewash, I want to question its effectiveness. What is the biggest problem we face, initiating students into argument? Is there a real danger of classroom debates getting out of hand? Are we seriously worried about producing little Callicleses through our courses, graduates who would set out to enslave their fellows with the power of their *logoi*?

I do not think I am speaking from an exclusively Iowan point of view when I say that the hardest task is to get students to voice disagreement at all: with each other, with the readings, with me. We are not going to get a wider view

³¹ Gerald Graff *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003). 56, echoing Smith's earlier remarks about "the adolescent caricature that argument is what occurs at home around the dining room table when everyone shouts and no one listens. Conclusion: keeping one's thoughts to oneself is the wisest strategy; privacy is protective coloration that leads to some ethic of immature toleration; 'let everyone do their own thing.'" "Narratives into Problems," 733.

of this task from those contemporary theories of argumentation that want to make difference disappear.

Of course, we don't need theories of argument which aim to increase the amount of difference in the world, either; that would be unnecessary, even if it were possible. Instead, if we take arguing as central to college education, what we seem to need is an argument theory that aims to take disagreement public, to render it articulate, to make it *appear*.

If we will not receive much help from argumentation theorists (at the moment) to say more about argument, perhaps we should turn to those other people who constitute the college: those students. I began a few years ago to listen to listen more carefully to students enrolled in the junior/senior level introductory Argumentation & Debate courses I teach, at first from curiosity to find out whether they shared the general culture's negative view of arguing, and if so, whether that view was impeding their learning. It proved easy enough to elicit pessimistic views of argument as fighting, as well as optimistic views of argument as dispute resolution.³² But I also heard occasional hints of something else. Students would sometimes tell me that they were taking the course to improve their "self-confidence." That was surprising. I wasn't sure what they meant by

³² Jean Goodwin, "What Does Arguing Look Like?" *Informal Logic* (forthcoming).

self-confidence, nor how they thought they were going to get it through learning how to debate.

So last Fall term, in 2004, I decided to explore this question. Throughout the Argumentation & Debate course, I ask students to articulate their goals, to reflect on their performances, and to construct their views of what argument is and why it should (or should not) be cultivated. This time through I saved the material, then sorted through it, looking for something *interesting*.³³

One striking feature of the students' statements is the weight borne by spatial terms, and in particular, by a language of posture. For example, at the end of the first week, half the class listed the ability to argue impromptu among their main learning goals. Some students expressed this in temporal terms: they wanted to learn to argue "fast." But more stressed a disposition in space: arguing "on the spot," "on their feet" or even "on their toes." This vocabulary of posture was elaborated later in the semester by talk of "standing" to argue. At times, the students' references to "standing" seem literal; I do make them rise to debate. The following student, for example, may be speaking just of that physical act when he/she says:

³³Since I am not addressing my social scientific colleagues, I will neglect to mention that I used a methodology known as cluster analysis.

I thought standing up in front of class speaking and giving our side was a good experience, but was kind of frustrating because we needed more evidence and proof to stand behind us.³⁴

Notice though that even here the physical standing up is coupled with a figurative "standing behind." Most frequently in the students' reflections references to "standing" and arguing have a such a wider significance, whether they evaluate it positively or negatively. For example:

Having skills as a debater would help me stand up for things I want or am passionate about in general. (14)

I dislike conflict because I am forced to stand up for my own views and I tend to feel that my self-worth is under attack. I don't feel conflicts are worth my feeling bad about myself or my views so I just avoid them. (3)

In addition to talk of the upness of "standing" we find also talk of its outness, as when one student noted that in a democracy,

anyone can come out in public and take a stand for anything they believe in. Whoever takes a stand must be ready to defend doubts and objections, but all reasonable arguments are valid. (1)

³⁴ When the student's statement was not anonymous, I identify the author by number. Punctuation and spelling are corrected silently.

It is notable that in all these passages, what arguers are "standing up" or "out" for are quite personal—"things I . . . am passionate about," "my *own* views," what "they believe in." More radically, students sometime speak of argument as a disposing "out" of the *self*:

I think that if you are arguing you are putting yourself out there in a way (5).

I personally prefer the research part of the debate because if I do eventually have to put myself out there to be attacked I want to have as strong a defense as possible, to protect myself from humiliation (3).

As the two passages quoted from student (3) suggest, some experience such self-revelation in argument as decidedly risky. Being "on the spot" or "on your toes" is of course an unstable position. Further, the ground on which students are "standing" turns out to be a terrain of disagreement. Indeed, the basic act of argument may be a "standing up *against*," as observed by one student:

In order for my generation to make a change we must stand up against what we don't believe in and inevitably that will entail debate and argument. (2)

This means that arguing opens one to attack, as many students commented:

I felt sort of trapped and I needed to explain myself which I'm not used to.

I felt nervous as if I were in front of a firing squad. I was worried that when it came to my turn I wouldn't have anything to say.

Arguing values also leaves people vulnerable. To argue your values leaves you open to scorn and ridicule from people who don't agree with you. (13)

The "vulnerability" mentioned in this last passage was expanded upon by student (19), who had had considerable experience in public speaking prior to the class:

Standing before a [large] audience . . . creates an incredible sense of vulnerability. As a speaker, offering yourself so wholly to an audience creates a human interaction whereas you are judged and examined for your ability to communicate but also the speaker experiences acceptance or rejection from the audience. . . .

Opinions about you are quickly formed by the other person.

Debating puts a person in the position to be examined by another (19).

If one fails to meet the challenges of the argument, the consequences to the self can be severe. Student (3)'s negative view was quoted twice above—his/her feeling of having "self-worth" under "attack," and being faced with "humiliation."

At the same time, most students considered the rewards of self-revelation in argument to more than outweigh the risks. In part, students speak of "standing"

as an opportunity—or compulsion—to consider more deeply where they "stand."

Another student with extensive prior experience articulated his/her view thus:

The more you're forced to defend an idea, the more you really grow to understand and gain a better view of your own opinion. I spend a lot of time defending [a topic]. Each time I find myself defending that issue, I just become that much more passionate about it and understand better why I believe what I do. Being challenged, and being forced to defend my own view only creates better understanding of where I stand. It gets to the point where I welcome a challenge because I always grow stronger as a result.

(9)

And again, what can grow stronger through argument is not only one's "own view" but one's *self*. Many students mentioned the "personal growth," "self-discovery," self "learning" and self-"definition" that can come from "standing" to argue. For example:

I think argumentation and debate have helped me define who I am as a person. It forces me to examine the facts and decide for myself what is important to me. People who choose not to take a stand on an issue would have a hard time defining their beliefs and values. (7)

The themes in this last passage were picked up by other students who noted the negative effects of *not* "standing" for things. For student (16), the alternative to "standing up" was to "sit silently where no one can judge your ability to communicate, interact, think, or passions." Several other students commented on the personal costs of "sitting" the argument out, or of "sitting back, being passive."

"Standing" to argue thus in the students' view serves to define the self to the self. "Standing out" in public is similarly conceived as defining the self to others.

People's thoughts and ideas are so diverse from one another that it sometimes takes a debate to understand where one is coming from

(2)

One student framed this point succinctly in visual terms:

Arguments are not about agreeing. I argue to get my point of view seen. (14)

In other reflections, the reference was not to sight but hearing:

All in all, arguing is a good thing if done correctly. It gives you the chance to take a stand and support your stance. It gives you the opportunity to be heard and hear others. (5)

This passage links the language of "standing" to another cluster of terms, one centered on the "voice" which is heard and respected. For example:

I believe that debate is about getting my voice heard and gaining respect. (14)

Having untangled the thread of talk of "standing" to its end, however, I'll refrain from seeing where this new strand leads.

To summarize: it seems that students experience their initiation to argument as the formation of a self. To take a stand is to make a place for oneself in the world, a place visible to oneself and to others. This is an uncomfortable position to be in, and risky, since there is no guarantee that one will be able to maintain one's upright posture. But if successful, one can gain a justified assurance in the stability of one's self and one's commitments; a disposition worthy of being called self-confidence. As one student folded together all these themes,

To get up and speak and be respected for what I was saying, even if others did not agree, was truly, as is explained in [one course reading] exhilarating. There is no other way to describe the feeling when you're in an argument and you're stating your opinion and you know that you're winning. I would like to feel like that again: confident and knowledgeable and eloquent. (12)

Now, that's interesting. As a conception of argument, there's little like it appearing in contemporary theory.³⁵ As a conception of undergraduate education, it perhaps echoes most William Perry's work on development during the college years.³⁶ I will follow up neither of these remarks here, and instead conclude as usual that more research is needed.

In the meantime, I return to the classroom in this sprawling research university. With my old teacher's eye I look around at the sleepy students under the buzzing lights, slouched in one piece desk-seats which seemed designed mostly to hinder their escape. I'm there to produce SCHs for my department, justifying our FTEs. They're there to fill in a blank on their POS forms, justifying their BAs. But if we take arguing to be central, as Smith, and apparently my students, guess it is, then I when I open my other eye I see with dizzying double vision that most important work of the College still going on.

³⁵ With the single exception of Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., *Philosophy and Argument* (State College, PA: Penn State University Press, 1959).

³⁶ William G. Perry, Jr., *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999 [orig. 1968]).