

A conversation about Argue to Think

Dr Dani Hilliard - an experienced teacher whose research is the core of the Argue to Think project.



“ But Miss, it isn't that we don't know how to write essays – our teachers are really great at getting us to structure our work – you know PEEL and all that... it is simply that we just don't know what to put in the essays – **we don't know what we think...** ”

The above response from a sixth-former was not only insightful, but also pivotal to my research. This comment made me realise I had found the potential 'missing link' to helping A Level History candidates write better essays!

History is my passion but I have taught other subjects, including Critical Thinking at A Level. I have also contributed to PGCE and Masters courses. I am very aware students find it difficult to write the sophisticated, nuanced argument that is necessary for the highest grades at A Level and for university success, and decided to pursue a PhD to study this issue in-depth.

My research, funded by the University of Exeter, was to investigate the links between spoken and written argumentation in A Level History, and several schools working with the History PGCE team at the University of Bristol were keen to help me. This was a unique opportunity. I wanted to make sure that at the end of my PhD, I had something useful that would help students write more effective responses containing sophisticated argument.

Argue to Think

The key to my research was the recognition that the most successful way to help students *write* effective essays was to encourage them to engage in verbal arguments first. Because History is seldom reduced to

two sided binary thinking it is important to encourage students to explore differences to appreciate the layers of nuanced meaning.

The first stage of the collaborative research began with an exploratory investigation which involved discussions with History examiners, classroom observations, and interviews with students and teachers about the problems with constructing History essays.

Based on the observations, a classroom intervention was designed and rigorously tested. The most pertinent result was that the students who engaged in the most active exploratory argumentation were the students who were most successful at writing persuasive History essays.

This was not tied to ability either. Those students who were used to engaging in formal debate were actually disadvantaged because they closed the argument down by 'winning the argument at all costs' rather than exploring difference and wanting to understand alternative points of view.

Several other schools and sixth form colleges became interested in my research and have incorporated the intervention programme I developed into their A Level classrooms. And so, I founded *Argue to Think*, an organisation where our main principle is to help people who struggle with crafting complex arguments.

Try it out for yourselves

Here are two activities that are part of the Argue to Think approach:

1. The arguing process – establishing ground rules

Before you run a classroom argument or a more formal debate session with students, ensure that there are ground rules. These rules are best brokered by the students themselves. In my experience, teacher-imposed ground rules are counter-productive.

In groups of 4 or 5, ask your students to come up with the best ground rules for arguing. Not only does this give the students a vested interest in the process, but it also gets them talking together and making decisions for themselves.

Get the students to share the results on the whiteboard, and establish the fact that everyone agrees to these rules before selecting a topic to argue or 'debate' about. Then, if the arguing becomes too heated you simply refer to the brokered rules. The students themselves are already aware of what is expected, so 'heated violent arguments' won't occur.

The rules are underpinned by the complete commitment to mutual respect between students, and the realisation that it is the ideas and the ideas alone that are being discussed and argued over. The intention is to explore the space between the two 'sides' and to see what else emerges. That is why 'arguing to think' is a positive way of helping students engage in safe classroom interaction and debate.

This does, however, need to be carefully introduced into classroom practice, and we at Argue to Think are happy to help you do this.

2. Don't argue to win – argue to explore

Arguing to win at all costs is divisive and leads to considerable dissension: think Trump v Clinton or the Brexit Campaign. This is not what you want in your classroom. It is destructive, and destroys self-esteem.

Arguing to explore difference, however, offers the opportunity to engage with difference in a constructive way, and if done carefully leads to cognitive development. This is what makes Argue to Think useful as a learning approach across disciplines, especially in History.

Ask the students to imagine they are policy advisors and get them to watch a particularly heated short piece of Prime Minister's Question Time or last year's Trump v Clinton debates online, on a specific topic. Ask them to discuss what they have seen. The comments that should come up are:

- Adversarial
- Dissent
- Do they ever answer each other?
- Lack of resolution
- Personal attacks
- Where's the evidence?

Then in small groups ask them to write a joint report 'for their speaker', that discusses the differing opinions and then suggests the best solution. This process can then be developed to encourage individual students to write essays that take different opinions into account whilst encouraging them to argue their own point of view.

I hope you found these ideas useful – I'd love to hear how these activities worked out in your lessons!

Email: dani@arguetothink.com

Web: www.arguetothink.com

Twitter: arguetothinkEDU

Acknowledgements

There are many teachers and students I would like to thank during the process of my research. Please [click here](#) for more information.

