

GOOD THINKING

TEACHING ARGUMENT, PERSUASION AND
REASONING



ERIK PALMER

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CHAPTER 1

Introducing Good Thinking

“**N**ot everything is an argument!”
Those were the exasperated words of my father. You see, I joined the debate team in secondary school. The debate team profoundly changed my life ... for the better. Debate involves researching, collaborating with partners, thinking critically and performing under stress. Of course, debate also demands strong speaking skills, and as readers of my other books know, I am passionate about developing oral communication skills in all students. But the part that changed my father’s life for the *worse* was that debate is also about reasoning well. I never quit practising.

Yes, Dad, I could take out the garbage, but let’s look at that more closely. First of all, perhaps you are unaware of the women’s lib movement, but there is no reason why certain jobs should always fall to males. Why not ask one of my sisters to do this? Additionally, you lead a sedentary life in an office. Research indicates that exercise is good for health, and though it is only mild, taking out the garbage does provide some exercise and would be good for you. I care about you and want what is best for your health.

Perhaps you can understand his exasperation.

He was no doubt correct: not everything is an argument. But many definitions of the word *argument* contain phrases such as “suggesting reasons to persuade others”. If we use that meaning, it is certainly true that a large part of our communication *is* argument. We often try to convince people that an idea should be adopted. For example, we try to convince

- a spouse that it's a good night for pizza instead of leftovers
- the principal that more passing time is needed for students moving through corridors between classes
- the staff that the new initiative is good for everyone
- our students that they should work hard on the assignment
- our children that they should clean their rooms
- the shop assistant that they should honour the coupon even though it is one day past expiration.

Many times a day, we try to reason with others. I'll wager that at least once a day you think, *What? That's crazy! They are way off!* when you see or hear something that you think is unreasonable. Not a day goes by without us calling on our reasoning skills. We analyse the messages we receive. We reason with others. We even reason with ourselves: *Should I eat that doughnut? Explain, conscience.*

THINKING IN SCHOOL

How well do students think?

We usually answer that by pointing to some kind of score: Kim got all the answers right on the quiz; Roberta correctly edited her paper. They must have done some good thinking. What really went on, though? Kim did a nice job of *remembering* facts or procedures; Roberta did well *remembering* and *applying* the rules of our language. We test recall and application of facts and procedures all the time, but those are only two aspects of thinking.

How well do students apply analytical or argumentative or logical thinking? How effectively do they analyse information presented in diverse media? Can they critically analyse a speaker's point and point of view? How well do they construct an argument? These tasks all require *reasoning* rather than remembering. When we look carefully at our students, we notice that their reasoning skills are not what they need to be.

When I taught Year 8 civics, I didn't want my students to memorise random facts; I wanted them to see government as a living thing with real connections to their lives. I found that many topics in the curriculum led to lively discussions:

- What is the purpose of government?
- Should the government provide health care?
- What are the responsibilities of citizens?
- Should citizens have to pass a test to qualify for voting?
- What are the rights of citizens?
- Should students have those rights also? If so, should a school be able to punish a student for something done outside of class?

The discussions certainly inspired thought and, often, strong emotions. They also revealed many reasoning errors. For example, we once discussed a case involving a student who was suspended from school for making posts on a social media site. The posts were made outside of the school day but referred to other students at the school. The conversation follows:

DAVE: No one should get in trouble for something done off school grounds.

DERRICK: I know, right? What is this, Nazi Germany?

LATRICE: But lots of suicides happen from when someone said a bad thing about someone else on Facebook, you know. Shouldn't schools stop suicides?

SONJA: I don't care if someone says something bad about me. Facebook comments aren't a big deal.

Reflecting, we can see that every comment demonstrates an error in reasoning (and I note the chapter in this book where that type of error is discussed):

- Dave: a conclusion with no reasons provided (Chapter 4)
- Derrick: loaded words (Chapter 6)
- Latrice: no evidence for claim (Chapter 5) and derailing the train of thought (Chapter 7)
- Sonja: generalising and derailing (Chapter 7)

These errors were not entirely their fault. I taught students about their Bill of Rights, but when did I teach them how to think and reason well? Of course, I could excuse them by noting that impromptu speaking is difficult. No one had time to prepare a well-thought-out statement. But what about students' writing? How did they do when given more time to think?

I asked students to write a Twenty-Eighth Amendment to the United States Constitution and explain why it should be adopted. The Constitution of the United States has been amended twenty-seven times since its adoption, and I suggested that perhaps other changes are needed. I challenged students to think of a change they would like to see. One student thought that California should have more senators than North Dakota and wanted to change Senate membership. One thought the right to bear arms in the Second Amendment should be eliminated. Another wanted to eliminate the Electoral College. In spite of all the time they had to research and develop their reasons, the students showed specious reasoning skills. For example, an essay about the Electoral College contained these statements:

First, the Electoral College was created a long time ago. Things have changed since then. Eighty-four per cent of all polling places have electronic voting now so the Electoral College is not needed. (evidence does not match reason, Chapter 5) Second, Al Gore was the better candidate and should have won the presidency. (prejudice, Chapter 7) Why didn't he? Because of the Electoral College. Finally, small states don't get much of a say in the election. We only get nine votes but California gets fifty-five. Is California six times as good as Colorado? No. (misusing facts and figures, Chapter 7)

It was clear to me that I needed to spend some time working on students' reasoning skills. I wondered whether other teachers were thinking the same thing.

Fortunately, I know some other teachers, one of whom lives with me. My wife, Anne, teaches Year 4. I knew that students in secondary school were asked to create arguments and demonstrate good reasoning, but at what level do we ask this of younger students? I was curious about what could be expected in primary school, so I asked Anne for some help. She was quick to point out that, on a daily basis,

her students were doing the same kind of thinking I was asking of my students. She shared an example from her classroom about *Time for Kids*. She uses that magazine in her class and told me about the debate column that's in every issue. One issue's debate topic asked students to discuss whether commercials for fast-food restaurants might lead to childhood obesity. Her students had these responses:

My mother says that fast food is bad for you. (testimonial, Chapter 6)

Have you seen that one commercial where the guys fight over that one sandwich? (derailing, Chapter 7)

I eat lots of fast food and I'm not fat! (generalising, Chapter 7)

I watch TV and I don't eat fast food.

You do too! We went to McDonald's after soccer last week! (derailing, Chapter 7)

Just 'cause you watch TV doesn't make you fat. It depends how much you eat.

From these examples, I could clearly see that young students (a) love to engage with issues, (b) are asked to do high-level thinking and (c) are capable of reasoning but need guidance just as older students do.

So where are the materials for teaching these skills? You have a scope and sequence for maths, a science curriculum, a language arts program and more. Is your school like my wife's, with no materials for systematically and specifically teaching good thinking and reasoning? In preparing to write this book, I used social media to ask educators to contribute ideas about how to teach good thinking. It turned out to be a nonscientific study verifying that most of us feel unprepared for the job. These comments were typical:

My region has not done any professional development on argumentative writing.

The school system has little instructional resources on argumentative writing.

I have no real experience with argumentative writing.

I have limited instruction in teaching argumentative writing ...

My school has not provided me with any materials to help with argumentative writing.

How, then, can we be expected to teach thinking?

THINKING OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

I decided to create my own resource file. What real-life models are available?

Because I had a career in the commodity trading business before I went into education, I am still in the habit of checking financial news. When I took a break from writing, I turned on the television and saw a commentator on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange.

I have never liked the president [bias], and everything he does proves me right [confirmation bias].

I flipped to a sports channel. (I know. I should stop procrastinating and get back to work.) A commentator was complaining about the National Basketball Association's collective bargaining agreement.

*How can you expect anything other than a comment like that from him?
This guy is one of the dumbest guys in sports! [attacking the person]*

The next channel had an ad. What are ads? Attempts to use reasons to change your behaviour. A car commercial had gorgeous people and beautiful images surrounding the car (transference) and nothing about the features of the vehicle (lack of evidence).

Disappointed with the reasoning I had witnessed, I decided to look to see how an online discussion was going. I posted a response to a blog that was very critical of state standards. The original blog was on a site for educators. An excerpt from the discussion:

ERIK: With which standards do you have a problem? Be specific. For example, is there a maths standard at some year level that you think is wrong? A speaking standard that is off base?

BLOGGER: Why are you defending the standards? [changing the burden of proof]

ERIK: I didn't defend them. I just asked you to tell me one particular standard that you don't like. Can you give me an example of a bad standard?

BLOGGER: I guess we will just have to agree to disagree. [ignoring the question]

Yes, the debater in me loves to probe. And the debater in me notices when poor thinking occurs. Even well-educated people often seem unable to make reasonable responses. In this case, I was left wondering what we were disagreeing about. We weren't even able to engage in a discussion that might have revealed points of contention!

I think you see the point. Students (and all of us) are bombarded with poor reasoning everywhere. My quest for real-life models of reasoning revealed evidence of more problems instead of examples of good thinking to share with students. I still had a long way to go in developing my reasoning-skills unit. I was pushed to continue by forces outside my classroom as well.

SO WHAT?

Kids say goofy things in class. Television shows are driven by ratings, and drama trumps reasoning. Why should we care? After all, teachers have nothing else to think about, right?

I understand. When I wrote *Well Spoken* (Stenhouse 2011), I had an uphill battle trying to persuade many others that we needed to address the poor oral communication that our students demonstrate every day. As I mentioned in that book, reader's theatre is more effective if students speak well. Read-alouds are better, poetry recitations are better, explanations at the board are better, book reports are better, science fair project talks are better, research presentations are better, podcasts are better, class newscasts are better, foreign language dialogues are better, all discussions are better ... Well, you get the idea. Virtually everything that happens in our classes is oral language dependent, and all of it is better if students are well spoken. Now it seems that more educators are on the bandwagon. I introduced a framework

for understanding the components of all oral communication. Then I offered mini-lesson ideas that develop speaking skills and that every teacher can sneak into what they already do.

Indeed, this book is in part a response to *Well Spoken*. I spoke of the two parts of all oral communication: building the talk (everything you do *before you open your mouth*) and performing the talk (the things you do *as you are speaking*). We build talks designed to entertain and talks designed to inform. And as pointed out earlier, we often build talks designed to convince and persuade others. Those talks require good reasoning.

IT'S UP TO YOU

Do you ever have discussions in your class? Do you ever ask students to explain their thinking? Do you ask students to think about why something happened, whether in a novel, in the news, or in a science lab? Do you have Socratic circles? Have you ever asked students to write a persuasive essay or give a persuasive speech? What other situations in your classes require reasoning skills? Reasoning may not have been a big part of our instruction, but now it needs to be addressed by all teachers at all year levels. As we'll see in the next chapter, standards in every subject mention argument, claims, evidence and more. But that is only the immediate impetus for us. The standards came out of a desire to get all students ready for life as active and informed citizens, and that demands good thinking.

Teaching thinking will affect everything we do. By making small adjustments to what we already do, we can develop better thinking in all students. We can add little lessons that are practical and simple to implement and that will dramatically improve student thinking.

(Notice what just happened: I built an argument about why we should care about teaching reasoning skills. I talked about how *Well Spoken* made an argument for increasing oral communication instruction. I made an argument that with a small effort and a few tweaks, all of us can make a huge difference in students' thinking ability. See? Reasoning is everywhere, and the ability to reason well will be useful every day of our lives.)