INFORMAL LOGIC
XIII.1, Winter 1991

# Teaching Note

## Students: A Source-Spot for Arguments

LEONARD J. BERKOWITZ *Penn State, York Campus*

In the past decade there has been an explosion of critical thinking and informal logic courses, and there has been a corresponding explosion of critical thinking textbooks. However, when I first began teaching critical thinking, I ran into a problem. While I found that many of these texts provided excellent instruction in critical thinking skills, I was not satisfied with any of the texts with respect to the sample arguments they supply for students to evaluate. What I wanted was a large supply of "real-life" arguments on topics that the students would find interesting and important.

When I first encountered my problem, I thought that it would be easily resolved. Why not simply use examples from old logic texts such as Copi's *Introduction to Logic*? However, what might be virtues for the purpose of analyzing arguments—the variety of topics and the scope of the examples—tend to be drawbacks in the evaluation of arguments. Students don't need to know much about the subject matter of an argument in order to analyze its structure. But that lack of knowledge can be fatal when they attempt to evaluate the argument. They have no way of knowing whether the premises are true, nor can they evaluate the reasoning. Furthermore, the subject matter is often too advanced, too abstract or too "academic" to interest the students.

The second solution that occurred to me was the public forum; e.g., the editorial page in newspapers or magazines. However, neither editorials nor letters to the editor really suit our needs. Letters to the editor are generally about the right length for beginners but the quality of the letters is too poor to be useful. They are often so badly written that it is difficult to find the arguments within them (if indeed they contain arguments at all). Editorials are a better bet, but are still basically unsatisfactory. They are often too long or complex for beginning students to use their new skills in a direct way (although this might not be a problem if they are used very late in the course). More importantly, the subject matter is usually of little interest to students. There are also some books specifically designed to provide arguments for evaluation (Baum's *Ethical Arguments for Analysis*, for example), but they generally suffer from the same problems as the textbook or the letters to the editor/editorial approach. Thus I was still left with a problem. How would I find arguments that would be both interesting and accessible to students?

About six years ago, I tried a different approach to the problem and, though simple, it has proved so successful I thought it worth sharing—I have my students supply the arguments themselves. Each student writes out two arguments on a given set of topics. I then use the students' arguments for analysis and evaluation later in the course. Not only does this solution satisfy the goals I began with, but it has proved to have unexpected benefits as well.

The assignment is a simple one. On the

first day of class, I hand out the instructions for the first assignment: each student is to write out two arguments (about a half page each). I provide a list of 10-15 topics from which they must choose two different topics for their two arguments. I select topics that I believe the students will find interesting and important, ones about which they probably already have their own opinions. The list is revised each year; when I find that all the students agree about a topic or that no one has shown any interest in it, I drop it from the list. Current or "hot" topics are likely to be on the list for only a single year. (The 2 Live Crew controversy was a good topic last year but is unlikely to arouse much interest in the future.) I allow students about 15-20 minutes to write out their first argument in class; the second is due at the beginning of the next class. The first is to be their own argument (although it may be one they have heard elsewhere and adopted). The second may be another of their own or it may be taken from another source (which must be cited). I make it clear that the assignment is totally ungraded. This aspect of the assignment is crucial. I want the students to write what they really think. I do not want them to tell me what they think I want to hear. It also removes any pressure from the assignment. Even students who are thinking of dropping the course often complete this assignment.

I have had to make a few refinements along the way. In addition to providing a list of topics, I now also supply possible conclusions for the arguments. (For example, for the topic of abortion, the possible conclusions are: "Abortion is immoral." "Abortion is not immoral." "Abortion should be illegal." "Abortion should not be illegal.") Obviously, I cannot supply all the possible conclusions, but I supply the most basic and salient ones, and the ones that lead to the most radical positions and arguments. When I did not provide conclusions, I found that some students simply wrote "about" the topics but never argued for a conclusion at all (despite the fact that the class time immediately preceding the writing was devoted to an explanation of the nature of an argument as an attempt to prove that a conclusion is true). With the addition of conclusions to the assignment, almost all of the papers turned in are clearly arguments (which is not to say that they are all clear arguments or good ones, but that is not my intent or need at this point). There is, of course, no set of instructions that is fool-proof. I did have one student ask whether she had to use all four proposed conclusions in her argument on abortion.

Despite the fact that the students are aware that the assignment is ungraded, they appear to take it seriously. I was pleased to find that they seem to enjoy the ungraded exercise as an opportunity to express their views on important issues without any pressure of evaluation. The only problem I have is convincing them to put the arguments aside until we are ready for them later in the course.

The reason I want the arguments so early in the course is the amount of clerical work involved in the next steps. I arrange the arguments by topic and number each argument within each topic so there is an easy way to refer to each individual argument; e.g., "Abortion-1" or "Death Penalty-4." I then have the entire set of arguments retyped with the students' names removed. There are obviously ways of accomplishing the same end without such high dependence on secretarial assistance (e.g., requiring students to type their own arguments) but these have drawbacks of their own (such as the sacrifice of the spontaneity of in-class writing). After the arguments have been retyped and arranged, I duplicate the entire set of arguments for each student. While this involves a significant amount of work, there is a sufficient amount of time for it—anywhere from 6 to 10 weeks, depending on the structure of the course and the calendar system being used. (On the other hand, the time problem is a significant one in a compressed schedule

such as a summer course or, worse yet, the one-week version of the course I have taught to high school students. In that case I do all the clerical work myself.)

When the students are ready to analyze and evaluate arguments, they have a wide selection of arguments of appropriate length to choose from. Depending on the size of the class, I've had from 50 to 80 arguments in the packets, all neatly typed and without names, so no students are embarrassed by their early efforts. (In fact, many students have difficulty identifying their own arguments.)

Since I have been using this method for several years, I now have a backlog of "proven" arguments on standard topics such as abortion and capital punishment. These are arguments which have a fairly clear structure, raise important issues, and have proved themselves useful for evaluation purposes in previous years' classes. When a given set of arguments from a class seems thin in one of these areas, or when none of the students' arguments raise some of these issues, I "seed" the packets with one or more of my standby arguments. I let the students know that this may be done, so they spend less time speculating on the possible source of the argument they are evaluating. Of course, identification is already difficult since some of the students who submitted arguments may have dropped the course by the time we get to them.

This procedure has solved the problems I faced when I tried other solutions. The topics are ones the students are interested in; this is guaranteed by two facets of the procedure—first, I only propose topics that I have reason to believe will interest the students and second, the students choose from among these topics, so if I am wrong about their interests (as I was when I thought they would be interested in the topic of mercy killing), the students save me from my folly by simply ignoring my choice. Of course, instructors might be able to increase student interest further by allowing students to add topics of their own, but there are also pitfalls in this procedure. In the first place, what interests one student might not interest others and the idea is to use topics that interest many of the students in the class. Second, there is the need to provide conclusions so the "arguments" really are arguments. This is more difficult to do in the case of spur-of-the-moment additions. In any case, I have not found additions necessary.

Other problems of previous solutions are also avoided. All the arguments in the packet are really arguments. (I eliminate the few that are not before I have the arguments retyped.) And the length of the arguments is appropriate for students to handle the arguments in a straightforward way. (I do show them how to handle longer arguments, but at least in the beginning of the evaluation section of the course I would like them to be able to use their newly acquired techniques for analysis and evaluation in a very simple, direct way.)

These are the major characteristics I was looking for when I began searching for arguments for the students—appropriate length, actual arguments instead of some nonarguments mixed in, and topics the students would find interesting and important—so I was satisfied with the solution from the beginning. However, I soon discovered it had other benefits as well. Not only do students find the issues important, they find the arguments themselves important. They turn in arguments that they believe in themselves or that they have heard from others. Thus they are interested not only in the topics but in these particular arguments on the topics. If I supplied the arguments, there is no way that I could provide arguments the students would find important except by chance. Instructors might think that the crux of an issue lies in one area when students are concerned with arguments that lie along entirely different lines. This is particularly likely to happen with issues that instructors are most familiar with. It is all too easy to forget that students are beginners in content as well as argument

skills. What an instructor might dismiss as an obviously weak line of reasoning might well seem persuasive to a newcomer to the issue. Thus the evaluation of arguments becomes important from the viewpoint of content as well as skills. Students learn a great deal about the topics we cover as they develop their critical thinking skills. They become more sophisticated in important issues as well as in reasoning. Part of this benefit derives from the fact that the students really care whether the arguments are good and whether the conclusions are true. They are not just engaged in abstract academic exercises.

By using topics that students disagree about, I can be sure that they will really try to find the flaws in the arguments they evaluate and not just go over them superficially. Thus the students become concerned about the content of the course—the skills of critical thinking—as well as the content of the arguments. The two become intertwined; in order to deal effectively with the subjects and the arguments, the students need to have a good working knowledge of the skills taught in the course. And because they see this connection in this practical way, they carry the skills over into other classes. I like to think they carry the skills outside of the classroom as well, but I have little direct feedback for that. I know that there is a carryover into other classes because both students and other instructors have told me about it. And perhaps that is a hint that I may be achieving something I sought all along: students may not only be learning the skills of critical thinking, but they might even be acquiring the critical attitude. Only when this happens can we say that we are truly helping them to become critical thinkers.

*LEONARD J. BERKOWITZ*
*DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY*
*PENN STATE, YORK CAMPUS*
*1031 EDGECOMB AVENUE*
*YORK, PA 17403* □