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Argument reconceived?

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Argument reconceived?

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Abstract

Just over ten years ago, Educational Review published an article *Reconceiving Argument* (Andrews 1997). In the article, Andrews traced some of the changes in the conception of argument that had taken place within educational contexts (primarily within the UK) over the previous few years. An important aim of our article is to consider whether there is any evidence that the (re)conceptualization of argument discussed in Andrew's article has permeated educational theory and practice in the last 10 years. Specifically we will consider his invocation of new metaphors to conceive of the argumentation process as more akin to a dialogic exchange in contrast to adversarial combat. We question whether such a framing diminishes the value of conflict and confrontation in the argumentation process.

140 words

Introduction

Just over ten years ago, Educational Review published an article *Reconceiving Argument* (Andrews 1997). In the article, Andrews traced some of the changes in the conception of argument that had taken place within educational contexts over the previous few years. The fundamental change, argued Andrews, was a shift from a perspective rooted in logic and philosophy to one that took greater account of the rhetorical and cultural aspects of argument. With a focus primarily on the "process of arguing" (i.e. *argumentation*) Andrews illustrated how this shift was borne out in the UK in a number of educational projects taking place throughout the early to mid 1990s. Whereas initial research (e.g. Andrews 1989) was underpinned by more traditional notions of argumentation (namely the process of reasoning), in later projects, such as *Improving the Quality of Argument in Higher Education* (see Mitchell and Riddle 2000, for final report), definitions were reworked in order to place greater emphasis on dynamic, dialogic and (optionally) multimodal ways of debating and exploring difference. At the end of the article, Andrews (provisionally) redefined argumentation as *"an arrangement of linguistic, visual and/or physical propositions in engagement with one or more other points of reference in order to change or assert a position"* (Andrews 1997, 267). He argued that the metaphor of the town square with its associations of *barter, conversation* and *redirection* were more central to such a definition than the more familiar metaphors of *war* and *battle*.

Berrill had in fact advocated a similar direction in the early 1990s, arguing for a replacement of the war metaphor which she asserted "is monological and seeks to destroy opposing viewpoints" (Berrill 1992, 100). She supported a reframing of

argumentation which would facilitate a "dialectical exploration of the truths offered by alternative points of view". In the mid 1990s, (Crosswhite 1996, 202) was making a similar argument, asserting that "there are many, many ways to uncover differences" and calling for new forms of written argument which may "include 'twofold' or 'threefold' arguments without deciding among them".

An important aim of our article is to consider whether there is any evidence that the (re)conceptualization of argument as discussed by Andrews has permeated educational theory and practice in the years following the review (i.e. from the mid 1990s to the mid to late 2000s). Specifically we will consider his invocation of new metaphors to conceive of the argumentative process as more akin to a dialogic exchange as opposed to adversarial combat. To do this, we will examine three (to some extent interrelated) prominent trends in the theory and practice of educational argumentation which have come to the fore over the last decade or so, particularly in Western Europe, and which are exemplified in Coffin and O'Halloran (2008). In turn, we will discuss the focus on argumentation as a dialogic process, particularly within socio-constructivist and socio-cognitive theory, and as a process of problem solving within collaborative learning. We will then consider the role and impact of new technologies (namely electronic conferencing and visualization software tools). In particular we will reflect on the tendency of these approaches to frame argumentation as *dialogue, collaboration* and *consensus building*. A second aim of this article is to question whether such framings diminish the value of conflict and confrontation in the argumentation process. As a form of support for the discussion we will make reference to an exploratory investigation of patterns of argument related terms in a small corpus of relevant journal articles.

We are interested in the role of conflict because (following the socio-cognitive conflict theories of Piaget (1932/1965) and Doise et al. (1984)), we see it as an important catalyst for cognitive change in the sense of modifying and revising beliefs and positions (see also Leitão 2000, 2001). Our own U.K. based research into online argumentation in secondary school history (Coffin 2007), and an undergraduate course in Complementary and Alternative Medicine (Hewings et al. 2007), has shown that, although conflict in the form of counter-argumentation is rare, it plays a significant role: once a claim is contested, it is more likely to provoke further contestation leading to chains of argumentation consisting of claim, counterclaim and counter-counterclaim. In other words, conflict in the form of challenges and counter-arguments is an important mechanism for developing and sustaining argumentation. Keefer et al. (2000, 73) make a related point in the context of American students' face-to-face critical discussion of literary texts where the goal is to consider and understand different viewpoints:

> Although consensus could be valued as an outcome of critical discussion, the appearance of consensus during the course of the discussion can actually undermine the main goal of a critical discussion.

It is therefore of some concern that recent research studies have consistently found that students across a number of educational and disciplinary contexts avoid confrontation, preferring instead to support rather than challenge each others' points of view (Coffin et al. 2005; Hewings et al. 2007; Jeong and Joung, 2007). This seems worthy of investigation and discussion in the context of a review on changing theoretical orientations and practices.

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Argumentation as dialogue

Within a socio-cultural perspective on cognition and learning, argumentation in the form of "learner-learner" or "learner-expert" dialogue is perceived as a means of deepening learning. Following Vygotsky (1978), it is argued that, by internalising linguistic processes of argumentation as they occur in social dialogue, learners develop higher level mental processes such as critical reasoning and reflection (McAlister et al. 2004). In this sense the socio-cultural orientation to argumentation is similar to that encapsulated in the town square metaphor proposed by Andrews: there is a strong sense of the dynamic and the dialogic. In particular, the multi-voiced nature of argumentation is emphasized and considerable importance is attached to students examining alternative positions in order to develop their argumentative reasoning. It is this framework which has informed an important line of research into school science initiated in the UK based projects *Enhancing the Quality of Argument in Science Lessons* and *Ideas and Evidence in Science Education* (see Erduran et al. 2004; Driver et al. 2000; Osborne et al. 2006). These projects which ran from the late 1990s to mid 2000s and continue to be nationally and internationally influential are underpinned by the view that evaluating the competing explanations and accounts on which scientific theory is built is central to developing expertise in the subject. In order to help students engage in such a process and on the basis (following Kuhn's (1991) findings) that many students are epistemologically naïve in their argumentative skills, a key objective of the projects has been to introduce argumentative dialogue into science classrooms through structured group work.

In relation to the aims of this article, one of the interesting aspects of the science projects is the way in which they reveal quite different views regarding the role of conflict and counter-argumentation. That is, on the one hand, the researchers were concerned that students should participate in counter-argumentation and rebuttal[1], particularly given that analysis of the dialogue data showed its importance in requiring students to evaluate the validity and strength of a scientific explanation and to become engaged in sustained scientific thinking (Erduran et al., 921). On the other hand, the teachers participating in the project held quite varied views: whereas some designed debates and role plays to actively encourage students to take opposing positions, others deliberately discouraged counter-argumentation (Simon et al., 253-256). Whilst being careful not to over-generalise from a relatively small sample of teachers, this does raise the question of whether counter-argumentation is perceived by some teachers as irrelevant or antithetical to science learning and/or to group work.

This remains an open question, of course, and there are likely to be a number of contributing factors. However, it seems to us that one likely explanation lies in the increasing tendency to construe classroom discussion as a process of *listening carefully, making contributions and asking questions that are responsive to others' ideas and views* (UK English national curriculum level 4) [2]**.** Rather than emphasise

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[1] Following Toulmin's (1958) seminal work in argumentation theory, rebuttal refers to a challenge to a claim pointing out the circumstances under which the claim would not hold true.

[2] A search of UK national curriculum documents showed almost a complete absence of a discourse of argumentation. Where talk and discussion do feature such as in English the terms used (as in the extract above) avoid the notion of argumentation, confrontation and conflict (see http://www.ncaction.org.uk/subjects/english/levels.htm).

debate and critique such discourse orients more to supportive consensual talk. Even the researchers behind the argumentation in science projects appear at times to emphasize agreement and consensus rather than difference: "a *"dialogical"* or *"multivoiced"* interpretation of argument is a matter of examining different perspectives in order to reach agreement on acceptable claims or courses of action" (Driver et al. 2000, 291). Such a focus on agreement and consensus could, we suggest, underplay the role and value of confrontation and counter-argumentation.

In reality, of course, the dialogue involved in consensually driven collaboration may be conflictual (i.e. to reach consensus, conflict may be involved). However, it appears that for some researchers and educators confrontation and collaboration are distinct phenomena and incompatible. Certainly this is the implication of a statement by Munford and Zembal-Saul (2002) in an article reporting on their investigation of American trainee teachers undertaking a course on learning science through argumentation. They comment that seeing argumentation as the way "one thinks and constructs new understandings":

> has the potential to shift the focus **from confrontational to collaborative**
> **argumentation and its processes** which is more coherent with socio-constructivist
> perspectives.
> (Munford and Zembal-Saul, 2002, 3)

In the following section we will explore further the tensions that arise vis-à-vis the role of confrontation in approaches to argumentation within the context of collaborative learning. There we will also see some disjuncture within and between theoretical orientations and practical implementation. To begin with, we discuss ways

in which collaborative learning is shaping argumentation practices in the direction predicted in Andrews' article.

Argument as collaboration

Collaborative learning (CL) is a teaching-learning paradigm which developed in Europe in the mid-nineties (see Dillonbourg, 1999) but which now has global influence. It covers a wide range of approaches which involve groups of students working together in order to reach shared understanding or solutions or to create a product (see Littleton et al. 2000). Computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) uses technological environments to facilitate the group process whereby participants cooperate in an attempt to resolve different views (Wasson et al. 2003). Over the last ten years, particularly within CSCL environments, argumentation has come to be viewed as a particularly important form of collaboration and has developed its own research strands - Computer-Supported Collaborative Argumentation (CSCA) and Collaborative Argumentation-Based Learning (CABLE). Many CL theorists argue that collaboration and confrontation are positively related. Argumentation is perceived as involving "the confronting of cognitions and their foundations". According to Andriessen et al. (2003, 3-4), however, it is more than "mere incidence of conflicts" since CL is founded on a cooperative attempt to resolve difference. Thus argumentation is often linked to complex problem solving whereby learners construct and balance arguments and counter-arguments in order to find resolutions to problems (Weinberger and Fischer 2006).

The focus on exchanging propositions in a context of both conflict and cooperation in order to achieve a shared aim makes CL argumentation both similar and different to Andrews' (re)conceptualization. Clearly, as in the case of dialogic approaches, it is aligned with the view that argumentation is "*an arrangement of linguistic…propositions in engagement with one or more other points of reference in order to change or assert a position*" (Andrews 1997, 267). The difference lies in the greater emphasis on shared outcomes and consensus and significantly, at least at the level of theory, the prominence given to conflict, the "confronting of cognitions". That is, CL theorists propose that although consensus building can be integration-oriented it can also be conflict-oriented. Whilst the integration type occurs when students (in response to persuasive arguments) "operate on the basis of the reasoning of their learning partners" (Weinberger and Fischer 2006, 79), conflict-oriented consensus building pushes learners to scrutinize the reasoning of their peers (rather than simply accept their contributions) and forces them to find more or better arguments for their positions. Baker et al. (2002, 1) describe the positive impact of conflict as follows:

> interactional pressure imposed by mutually recognised verbal conflict can lead students to refine meanings, to dissociate notions and to elaborate more coherent discourses, either during argumentation phases, or else as a means of resolving, dissolving or closing them.

Significantly, Baker et al. point out that, whilst conflict might be theoretically desirable, it is not always easily generated in a CL classroom environment. For example, in a situation where students are required to put forward hypotheses in order to co-construct new (scientific) knowledge, they will not have "the kind of coherent

and firmly entrenched points of view that lead to dialectical confrontation" (Baker et al. 2002, 2). Indeed empirical evidence from the pan-European SCALE project (Internet-based intelligent tool to Support Collaborative Argumentation-based Learning in secondary schools) shows that much of the argumentation arising in the context of a scientific debate (in this case on genetically-modified organisms) could be described as "a *cooperative* (my italics) exploration of a dialogical space" (Baker et al. 2002, 2). in which students deepen and widen their understanding and awareness of the argumentative issues. That is the argumentative process is weighted towards students collaboratively examining and exploring different sides of the issues rather than confronting each other's own committed viewpoints. Nevertheless, despite the emphasis being on "cooperative exploration" data extracts from the SCALE project reveal that conflict does at various points play an important role by "forcing" students to clarify their position on an issue" (Baker et al. 2002, 2).

Interestingly, whilst conflict is acknowledged by CL theorists as an important mechanism for successful argumentation (though difficult to generate in some learning situations), it could be argued that the design of practical tools for supporting collaborative argumentation (such as computer software) does not take this sufficiently into account. Indeed, in the next section of our review, which considers the impact of technological innovations, we will argue that, in general, perhaps insufficient consideration has been given to the role of conflict and confrontation – both in the design and in the application of new computer software.

The impact of new technologies

One aspect of Andrews' (re)conceptualisation of argumentation which we have not covered so far concerns the way it can be construed through semiotic modes other than the verbal. Andrews states it is: "an arrangement of linguistic, **visual and/or physical propositions** in engagement with one or more other points of reference in order to change or assert a position". The multimodal nature of argumentation is certainly one that has increasingly come to the fore in CSCL as well as in a number of new technologies developed outside the CSCL tradition. Andriessen et al. (2003, 2) make the point that "although it may be tempting…to see argumentation as essentially a language-based activity…it is both *semiotic* and *epistemic*". Students need to "produce and mutually apprehend a variety of semiotic representations" (2003, 2). Indeed the possibility of representing the argumentation process in non-verbal form has led to a number of innovations within CSCA and CABLE. The Scale project, for example, developed a Dialogical Reasoning Educational Web tool (DREW) which includes software for jointly drawing argument graphs.

Computer-Supported Argument Visualization (CSAV) tools such as those developed within DREW are a major technological innovation whose roots stretch back to the early 1900s. The tools did not, however, become sufficiently usable and robust for use in educational contexts until the late 1990s (Buckingham Shum 2003, 20) after the publication of Andrews' review. In Kirschner et al's. (2003) comprehensive overview of some of the key international educational applications of CSAV, it becomes clear that the motivation for the design and development of the tools is a belief that competence in negotiating meaning through understanding multiple perspectives should be a major educational goal in the current climate of fast technological and societal changes and information rich electronic learning

environments. Argument visualization tools, it is argued, can support the negotiation or argumentation process by helping learners to contrast, assess, critique and integrate multiple perspectives.

Van Gelder (2003), for example, illustrates how CSAV was able to develop the reasoning skills of Australian undergraduate students, specifically their ways of thinking through where they stand on a claim in the light of the relevant arguments (referred to as *deliberation*). Drawing on Kuhn's (1991) study as evidence, he argues this is usually done quite poorly. He illustrates how a piece of software Reason!Able provides students with practice in constructing, modifying and evaluating argument visualizations. In essence, graphical techniques are used to represent evidential relationships among claims in a clear and unambiguous way. Most significantly, the software can also be used to enhance group deliberation. Van Gelder (2003) suggests a number of factors why this is so, but in relation to the concerns of this paper it is interesting to see how he argues in favour of reducing the role of personal conflict and contest:

> The argument visualization process smoothed the path to rational consensus by depersonalizing disagreement. In standard meetings or round-table discussions, positions tend to be identified with people, and debate becomes a personal contest as much as an objective considering of the arguments. When all attention is focused on the argument tree (*a "box and arrow" visual structure*), however, personalities drop away and people are much better able to appreciate the force of the arguments, and to see gaps and weaknesses.
> (van Gelder 2003, 114)

In essence, van Gelder and others working in the CSAV tradition argue that collaboratively constructed, externalised visual representations of beliefs and arguments reduce personal conflict by focusing attention on collective problem-solving or sense-making – referred to by Engelbart (2003, 206) as "Collective IQ". This raises the interesting question of how "depersonalised conflict" works and whether it has the same (we would argue "positive") impact as does conflict emerging from opposing points of view where human agency and ownership are present. Does it, for example, serve as a catalyst for cognitive change and/or trigger a chain of arguments (see earlier comments in the introductory section)?

New technologies present a number of additional issues relevant to the concerns of this article. One of the starting points for this review was the finding that students across a range of educational and disciplinary contexts avoid confrontation preferring to support, rather than challenge, each others' points of views (Coffin et al. 2005; Jeong and Joung 2007). In the previous sections, particularly in the *Argumentation as dialogue* section, we have discussed why the shift to argumentation as dialogue and collaborative exchange may possibly be contributing to, or reinforcing, this phenomenon. In our view, new types of computer-mediated communication (CMC), such as message boards and discussion forums, may also contribute to this phenomena though clearly practices will always differ across different educational sectors, institutions and student cohorts.   Nevertheless, it is perhaps significant that Coffin et al. (2007), for example, found in their investigation into school history electronic discussions that, although in their interviews students reported that they enjoyed arguing and in particular challenging and being challenged, in practice, counter-argumentation was infrequent across the five conferences

analysed. Similarly, Painter et al. (2003) found in their study of electronic discussions in a postgraduate Applied Linguistics course a striking absence of explicit disagreement and the active seeking of consensus instead.

One possible and significant explanation for the low frequency of conflict in these virtual environments is the fact that interpersonal relations between participants are more vulnerable than in face to face situations: due to an absence of non-verbal devices such as facial expressions, gesture and intonation participants may be less willing to risk offence by challenging or countering each other. Balancing against this is the fact that certain types of electronic conferencing such as asynchronous text-based conferencing (where participants post and respond to written messages at a time of their choosing) provide learners with the means (i.e. reflective time and a written archive) to keep track of complex questions or problems under discussion. It may be the case, however, that discussion boards and/or pedagogic discussions and tasks need to be carefully structured in order that students take advantage of such affordances. McAlister et al. (2004) and Ravenscroft et al. (2007), for example, argue that structured interfaces may be necessary to generate rich student debate and show how software tools such as *AcademicTalk* and *InterLoc* resulted in more sophisticated episodes of argumentation than in unstructured interfaces. They demonstrate how in the electronic conferencing programs students choose from sentence openers (such as *don't we need more evidence…*, *How is that relevant…*) and as a result (in their particular studies) engage in deeper, more extended, on-topic argumentation and frequently challenge each other.

A study by Jeong and Joung (2007), on the other hand, which also explored the effect of structuring students' discussion – in their case by requiring students to classify and label each posted message according to its overall function (such as argument, critique, evidence) - found that students using message labels were 2-3 times less likely to challenge other students. According to Jeong and Joung one plausible explanation for this finding is that the critique label carried negative connotations: "Its negative connotations could possibly have heightened the perception of critiques … being overly confrontational" (Jeong and Joung, 15). This returns us to an issue central to this review: what value does conflict have in newly emerging educational theories and practices? This is a question we will explore in the next section.

Some patterns in argument related terms: an exploratory search

In the previous sections we discussed how emerging approaches in educational argumentation tend to frame argumentation as *dialogue, collaboration* and *consensus building* and, in so doing, we suggested that such an emphasis may reduce the value of conflict and confrontation in the argumentation process. Even in CL approaches to argumentation, where conflict is accorded a significant role at a theoretical level, we have shown that classroom realities may diminish its role and significance. Indeed it has emerged in the course of the discussion that conflict and confrontation may be construed by some theorists, teachers or students to be at odds with collaborative and dialogic approaches to learning and/or to be avoided altogether as a negative phenomena. In this section we make reference to an exploratory search of patterns of

argument-related terms as another form of evidence. This search was carried out on a small corpus of journal articles relating to educational argumentation.

The corpus consisted of nine journal articles. Three of the articles represented the CSCL literature, three represented computer-based argumentation literature (but outside the CSCL literature) and three represented face-to-face argumentation. All nine articles were written by established researchers with equal representation from the USA, Western Europe and the UK. (see references for details of the articles selected). The articles were prepared as textfiles and then investigated for word patterns using a piece of software referred to as a concordancer[1] (located within Wordsmith Tools, version 4). This software makes it possible to establish the words that frequently co-occur with search terms. Such words - i.e. words which occur in the neighbourhood of a search word - are referred to by linguists as collocates. Collocation usually refers to the occurrence of two or more wordswithin a short space of each other in a text (Sinclair, 1991: 170) – normally a span of 10 words. The purpose of examining the collocates of selected words is to provide information about the 'company a word keeps' (Firth, 1957) and thus gain insight into the context and 'culture' in which it circulates.

The first term we searched on was argu*[2]. Argu* was selected in order to investigate the words circulating in its neighbourhood as represented in the journal articles. In total there were 953 instances of argu within the corpus (see Table 1). In

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[1] See (O'Halloran 2007) for uses of a concordancer in text and corpus analysis.

[2] The wildcard symbol * is used in concordance searches in order to detect words which share the same stem word e.g. using the stem dialog* the search picks up *dialogic, dialogue, dialoguing* etc. We were interested in words that occurred at least 5 times so this was specified as a setting.

line with our expectations the concordance search revealed that argu* collocates frequently with the terms *conferencing, dialogue, problem*, *collaborative*, providing some, though limited, evidence (due to the relatively small scale of the corpus) of a dialogic-collaborative orientation in contemporary trends in educational argumentation.

Less predictably it also emerged argu* collocated frequently with *counter* suggesting that considerable emphasis is in fact placed on the conflictual nature of argumentation. On closer inspection of the context of each of these occurrences (Wordsmith Tools enables analysts to search the surrounding context of each occurrence of a term) it became clear that 69% of the occurrences referred to *counter-argument* as a unit of analysis and there was little discussion of the relationship of such units of analysis and their importance as a mechanism for provoking and sustaining argumentation. Significantly the terms *conflict, confront* and *challenge* did not collocate with argu*

Searches on dialog* and collab* showed similar patterns. There was a strong nexus between *argumentation, dialogue* and *collaborative* but no association with the terms *conflict, confront*, *challenge* or indeed *counter. Consensus* on the other hand was found to collocate with dialog*.

Table 1: Findings of concordance searches

Search term	Instances in corpus	Frequency per 1000 words	No of articles	Relevant collocations – no of instances in corpus
argu*	953	0.98 – 19.07	9	conferencing – 23 dialogue – 22 problem – 22 collaborative – 21 counter - 16
dialog*	321	0.49- 19.97	8	argumentation – 16 consensus – 8 collaborative – 6
collab*	81	0.08 – 2.65	8	argumentation - 19 dialogue - 6

As we suggested previously the theory and practice of argumentation in the newly emerging collaborative, dialogic and technology supported frameworks (as reported on in recent journal articles) appears to give little prominence to conflict despite evidence of (and in some cases, theoretical commitment to) its pivotal role in triggering and sustaining debate and developing in students new positions on an issue. We should, however, emphasize that the findings from our corpus search are only indicative. Further searches of far larger sets of journal articles would be necessary to draw any firm conclusions.

Discussion: the changing role of conflict and confrontation

The first aim of this article has been to consider whether the (re)conceptualization of argument as identified and discussed in Andrew's review has become prominent in educational theory and practice in the years following it (i.e. from the mid 1990s to the mid to late 2000s). Our review of three recent trends combined with some evidence from an exploratory corpus- based investigation does indeed appear to point to the emergence of *dialogic exchange* as a dominant motif and one therefore aligned with Andrews' vision of *barter, conversation* and *redirection* (as opposed to *adversarial combat, battle* and *war*). The emergence of dialogism alongside collaboration is a phenomenon pertinent to overall developments in theories of learning and development (Mercer and Littleton 2007) and therefore it is perhaps not surprising that shifts in educational argumentation and education more generally are running in parallel. In this section we speculate as to whether dialogism, collaboration

and consensus building are in fact trends in the culture at large and whether, if so, this may partly account for the new orientation in educational contexts.

Certainly it would seem to be the case that in a range of political and social situations in what might be loosely termed "Western culture" there is increasing emphasis being given to "consensus building". Consensus building (also called collaborative problem solving) has also been increasingly used in public policy disputes at both local and international levels. The same can be said for "conflict resolution". For example, since its inception in the 1950s and 1960s and acceleration in the 1980s and 1990s, conflict or dispute resolution has been increasingly used in legal, political and family therapy contexts both to resolve private affairs concerning individuals and to resolve wider public disputes involving multiple parties. A search of the 32,277 instances of "conflict" in the 450 million words of the Bank of English corpus (a corpus of mostly newspaper journalism from the UK, USA and Australia in the 1990s and 2000s) found the following: "resolution" was amongst the highest lexical collocates (559 times) of "conflict" for a span of 4:4 along with "war" (852), "Palestinian" (929), and the highest "Israeli" (1166). There were only 3 instances of "constructive conflict". The evidence supports a common intuition that "conflict" has strong negative connotations, and thus something to be avoided, resolved etc. Indeed, such evidence explains why even when the authors of a recent article, Ravenscroft et al. (2007, 54), use what we would regard as a positive collocation, "constructive conflict", they still preface this with "legitimizing":

> … the students playing a dialogue game through InterLoc reported that the openers
> that were provided did not only shape their thinking but also made it easier and

acceptable to offer probing questions, disagreements and challenges, through

legitimizing constructive conflict between interlocutors.

Although the tenets and practices of conflict resolution and consensus building

vary, the overall guiding principle is to respond to conflict through a process of

listening to and addressing the concerns of all parties in order to reach a mutually

acceptable and satisfying outcome. The main objective of the approaches is that any

conflict should not be viewed as a contest to be won but as a problem to be solved

(Burton 1987) and is therefore in clear opposition to traditional notions of power

politics and the old metaphors of war and battle discussed by Andrews. Mediation,

conciliation and problem solving are key strategies in implementing such an

approach.

It can be argued that further evidence of the shift in thinking away from

polarized debates and competitive (sometimes aggressive) argumentation as a means

of resolving difference and conflict lies in the adoption of a "Third Way" political

philosophy by a number of recent Western leaders (Tony Blair in the UK and Gerhard

Schröder in Germany among others). These leaders made it their aim to create

common ground between traditionally opposed political ideologies. In national UK

politics, a micro but memorable moment in public discourse adds further illustration

of a possible shift in thinking. This was when David Cameron in his incoming speech

as UK opposition leader (Dec 2005) stated that he was "fed up with the Punch and

Judy politics" of traditional Westminster debate.

Although we have limited space to discuss in full the evidence for shifts in

wider public discourse and argumentation, we would suggest that we are currently

witnessing the result of an "argumentative turn" and that not surprisingly this is also being manifested within educational contexts. Thus whereas in previous decades formal debate and class discussion were the primary sites for learning and rehearsing the skills of argumentation, new types of tasks may require students to participate in new types of argumentation. These tasks, it appears, tend to favour collaborative dialogues in order that students reach shared outcomes and shared positions. Whilst such an orientation is clearly relevant given wider cultural and political changes, we would nevertheless like to emphasise the point made elsewhere – conflict even within collaborative argumentation may be a vital part of the process. Equally, we would argue that not all discussions, particularly those that concern the exchange of ideas rather than solutions to problems, require the dissolution of difference or shared action through consensus (see for example Dawkins (2006) and Dennett (2006) on these issues with regard to atheism). To this end we would suggest that more attention needs to be given to the mechanisms which provoke and stimulate students to exchange and challenge different points of view. As Felton and Herko (2004, 1), found in their study, if argument energises and excites students they will voluntarily elaborate on and defend their ideas.

A new focus for argumentation: language and discourse

Over the last two decades the role of language in learning has been increasingly recognized. In particular, developments in linguistic theory (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999) and applied linguistics research (see Christie 2002, for an overview) have shown the educational potential of systematic analysis of classroom discourse and disciplinary language use. Coffin (2006) for example demonstrates the educational

benefits of using linguistic analysis and description (in her case, school history) to make explicit to teachers and learners how language achieves educational and disciplinary goals (including the ability to argue). If this is the case, then it would seem helpful to conduct a close examination of the linguistic construal of conflict and confrontation both in traditional and changing argumentative practices in order to see how meanings made (or not made) at the micro level impact on the overall argument process. Coffin et al. (2007) for example, have recently argued that the way a claim is phrased may open up or close down the likelihood that it will be contested. In particular it may be useful to develop a taxonomy of different types of conflict (e.g. personal and impersonal conflict, constructive and negative, consensual and unilateral etc.) and how these are linguistically manifested. This may stimulate a close reconsideration of the role of conflict and confrontation in argumentation theory and practice. As Sandole and van der Merwe (1993) state:

> rather than being perceived as a negative experience, conflict is … an intrinsic and inevitable aspect of social life and (potentially) a catalyst for beneficial change.

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As discussed in Sandole and van der Merwe (1993) conflict need not be perceived as a negative experience. Rather it can be viewed as an integral and unavoidable aspect of social life and (potentially) a catalyst for positive change.

> rather than being perceived as a negative experience, conflict is … an intrinsic and inevitable aspect of social life and (potentially) a catalyst for beneficial change.

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(NB all articles comprising the corpus are marked with an asterix).

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