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Using Issues in Honors Education to Teach Argumentation

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Abstract: Topics and resources from honors education are used to teach argumentation in writing composition. The author discusses efficacies for increasing student awareness of, and reflection on, issues in honors education while engaging first-year students in honors issues that directly affect their lives.

Keywords: first-year composition; argumentative writing; rhetorical analysis; University of South Alabama (AL)–Honors College

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In my first-year honors composition course, I frequently use materials and topics from honors education, ranging from National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) publications to local campus honors issues, to demonstrate rhetorical analysis and argumentative genres. Rather than using a composition reader, I pair textbook chapters with relevant websites and selected essays from *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (JNCHC)* and *Honors in Practice (HIP)*, thus forming the basis for class discussion and in-class writing exercises for units on causal argument, rebuttal argument, definition argument, and so forth. For example, a textbook chapter on narrative argument pairs well with Bonnie D. Irwin’s 2011 NCHC presidential address, “We Are the Stories We Tell,” published in the 2012 volume of *HIP*.

Lead Forum essays from *JNCHC* are often appropriate for in-class rhetorical analysis exercises, and response essays in the forums show students how to engage in scholarly discussion and how to craft arguments for publication. Through rhetorical analysis, students discuss not only textual features—such as rhetorical appeals, supporting references, and the structure of the argument—but also contextual features such as venue of publication and expertise

of the author. For example, an analysis of the lead essay for the recent *JNCHC* Forum on “Honors and Social Justice,” Naomi Yavneh Klos’s “Thinking Critically, Acting Justly” can prompt thoughtful discussion of diversity and access in honors education while also examining her expertise in honors education as an honors program director and a past president of NCHC. Students can review the issue’s editorial front matter to learn how submissions are solicited and reviewed and how a scholarly journal is edited and published.

Students can also identify local honors issues on campus and then practice practical argumentation for real-world audiences, which frequently entails flexibility and spontaneity in assignment planning. For example, a recent restructuring of priority registration to a system scaffolded by class standing (honors seniors, general seniors, honors juniors, general juniors, etc.) caused a number of problems for my honors freshmen. On their scheduled registration day as my class period began, I was listening to them commiserate as I was writing notes on the board for that day’s chapter on proposal arguments, so I immediately scrapped my planned exercise in favor of using the chapter prompts to help them draft a proposal argument that had well-reasoned, practical, and feasible solutions for returning honors students to their original collective group in the priority registration schedule.

One benefit in using readings and topics from honors education is that it differentiates first-year honors composition from the high school AP English and dual enrollment courses in which students have already written standardized literary analyses or five-paragraph essays on commonplace topics such as gun control and euthanasia. For example, an in-class exercise on rebuttal argument that guides students through refutation (“no”) and counterargument (“yes, but”) of claims on the College Board’s AP promotional webpages typically generates animated class discussion of students’ wide range of positive and negative experiences with AP courses and tests.

Another benefit is that students develop their critical reading and argumentation skills while gaining a deeper understanding of honors education beyond test scores and résumé decorations. Students are more engaged in class discussions when they address honors issues that directly affect them. For instance, I demonstrate definition argument by positing the thesis that “an honors program is not a good fit for a gifted student.” Through a guided search of the websites for NCHC and the National Association for Gifted Children, students compare NCHC’s “Definition of Honors Education” and “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College” and NAGC’s “A Definition of Giftedness that Guides Best Practice” and “Traits of Giftedness”; they learn that “honors” is generally defined by academic programming

while “giftedness” is defined by the psychological makeup of the individual. In turn, students reexamine how they have used these terms interchangeably to define themselves and how traits of gifted people can work more effectively or less effectively within an honors academic environment.

Overall, using topics and resources from honors education to teach argumentation in first-year honors composition can increase student awareness of issues in honors education, promote student self-reflection about the meaning of post-secondary honors education, and demonstrate that honors is not merely a transcript designation but a nationwide community of faculty and students who strive toward excellence in teaching, research, and service in undergraduate education.

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