



Evaluativist Thinking: Helping Students to Write Arguments about Controversial Topics



Key Concepts

- **An argument is a claim sustained by at least one reason.**
- **Argumentation skills include producing arguments, counter arguments, and rebuttals.**
- **Epistemology** refers to how one comes to know truth in the world; how people distinguish belief from opinion, and where people think knowledge comes from. Epistemological development is a progressive integration and coordination of the objective and subjective dimensions of knowing from absolutist to evaluativist:
 - **Absolutist:** sees knowledge as certain, straightforward, and produced by authority
 - **Multiplist:** sees knowledge as ambiguous and idiosyncratic; sees individuals as having their own irreconcilable truths; views objective knowledge as not attainable
 - **Evaluativist:** believes there are shared norms of inquiry and knowing; sees truth as attainable; acknowledges the multiple perspectives and claims that need to weighed and evaluated

For many researchers,
evaluativist thinking is seen
as ideal reasoning
in argumentation



What did researchers want to know?

- Researchers examined how students' epistemology impacts their argument writing.
- 62 eight graders were introduced to two controversial topics.
- Students were asked to generate an argument, a counterargument, and rebuttal on these topics.
- Students were measured on their topic knowledge and interest for the two topics.
- Students were also measured on their level of epistemological understanding (i.e., whether students had absolutist, multiplist, or evaluativist epistemologies).

How Did Epistemology Influence Argument Writing?

01

Students at the evaluativist level outperformed other participants in the quality of their arguments, counterarguments, and rebuttals.

02

Topic interest was not related to how well students wrote arguments, counterarguments and rebuttals.

03

Prior knowledge of the controversial topics did not impact how well students wrote arguments, counterarguments, and rebuttals.

04

Epistemology therefore influenced argument writing significantly.

How Can Teachers Support Students' Argument Writing?



- **Assess students' views of knowledge and move them towards a view where knowledge is complex and tentative.**
- **Show students how the process of inquiry and reasoning with evidence (e.g., considering the source, structure, credibility of information) can allow them to reconcile conflicting accounts and write effective arguments about controversial topics.**
- **Use disciplinary-specific controversies during argument writing instruction to support students' development of evaluativist understandings by prompting students to evaluate all claims and gather evidence for both sides before proceeding to a final stance.**

Reference: Mason, L., & Scirica, F. (2006). Prediction of students' argumentation skills about controversial topics by epistemological understanding. Learning and Instruction, 16, 492-509.