

Afraid to Argue

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, MAY 7 2014

One of the most significant cultural differences I have encountered between French students and Australian students in higher education is the ability and willingness to mount an argument. It's incredibly frustrating to grade papers that refuse to take a position on a subject in international relations, particularly so after having spent class time and office hours explaining over and over that the paper *must* make an argument. For reasons that my colleagues explain to me are cultural and likely by-products of the typical French high school system, French students find it difficult – if not impossible – to lay out in a paper what they think about a subject or issue. Instead, they offer an essay that demonstrates how much they *know* about a subject but not actually what they *think* about a subject.

For the POL 210 course here I ask the students in the summer session to write a long, 4000 word paper on one of four research questions:

- Was the European Union constructed in order to keep Germany from re-emerging as an aggressive Central European power?
- Can a democracy be imposed from without or only developed from within a state?
- What is the greater threat to the European Union: Russian expansionism or Islamist terrorism?
- Would the Middle East be more or less stable if Iran gains nuclear weapons?

The questions are tailored in such a way that it should be easy for the students to undertake research, develop a thesis, and write a paper arguing in favour of that thesis. I don't expect the students to ignore alternatives to their thesis, but I do expect students to sustain an argument in favour of one of the (usually) two options on offer.

Take the final question in that list. I expect students to argue that the Middle East will either be more stable or that it will be less stable should Iran gain nuclear weapons. I don't mind *which* of these the students selects as their thesis and there are reasonable arguments from either side, and scholarly sources that support either perspective that can be used to evidence claims.

What I do not expect is what I am inevitably handed: a 4000 word paper with half laying out the case for stability, half laying out the case for instability, and a final line that reads something like 'In my opinion, based on the arguments from both sides above, the Middle East will be more stable'. No explanation, no further engagement, nothing.

In the best case this student has demonstrated to me that they have read widely, that they understand both sides of the debate, and that they can articulate scholarly arguments in their own words. What they haven't done is sustained an argument from their own perspective, with that final throw-away line offering no real explanation as to how they got to where they did.

Reading over draft papers like this I respond to the student that their conclusion is really where their writing should have started. That is, having looked over all of the evidence, all of the research, and having understood and weighed both sides so as to conclude that one is stronger, the student should have begun writing their argument from this stronger perspective. The final paper should be the student's argument in favour of one side or another in response to the question; it should not be a record of how much the student has read about a subject.

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In a sense, the typical French student is afraid to argue but the fault for this fear does not really lie with them. Having come through a high school system where the emphasis is on repetition, rote learning, repeating back to a professor what they have said to you and striving to prove knowledge rather than mounting argument it is little surprise that the students in my classroom have trouble developing and expressing arguments of their own. There is a strong cultural bias against expressing an opinion where a student might instead offer a summary of what others have said on the subject.

This culture has immediate effects on a student's results in the POL 210 class but I imagine the effects on French society more generally are marked. Training students in high school to never question a teacher, reinforcing the notion that smart people remember a lot of things others have said rather than develop their own thoughts, and pushing students to avoid expressing their own opinion because it might be wrong are all hallmarks of an education system that will stifle innovation, the development of new ideas, and effective analytical techniques and policy development in the next generation of French leaders. I'm convinced that this fear of mounting an argument and of expressing a reasoned opinion is something that France will need to reflect on in coming years at a societal level, and not just in the college classroom.

About the author:

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