For at least the last several decades, argumentative writing has been of central importance in secondary and higher education, and this emphasis has been heightened by argumentation’s designation as a “cornerstone” of the Common Core State Standards. Moreover, this focus on argumentation has been encouraged by extensive scholarship that investigates how argumentation is learned and deployed in various settings and how the teaching of argumentation might be improved. However, far less attention has been paid to determining why so many literacy educators, researchers, and policy makers believe that privileging argumentative writing is justified.

Using a methodology that combines ethnographic case study of writing pedagogy in an urban high school with theoretical analysis of scholarly writings that endorse argumentation, in this essay I demonstrate that the prominence of argumentation is underwritten by three commonly held assumptions: (1) that argumentative writing promotes clear and critical thinking, (2) that it provides training in the rational deliberation that is essential for a democratic citizenry, and (3) that it imparts to students a form of cultural capital that facilitates their upward academic and socioeconomic mobility. My findings are that these assumptions are unwarranted and that schools’ overemphasis on argumentation imposes severe limits on what counts as valid thought, legitimate political subjectivity, and a feasible strategy for addressing economic inequality. This study’s implication is that educators should reassess the value of argumentation and revise ELA curricula to include more diverse genres and discursive modes.

In the spring of 2009, I received a phone call from my friend Bob, who for over 20 years has worked as an English teacher and assistant principal at Tejada Community Academy, a public high school of about 1,700 students (over 94% of whom are Latino), located in a predominantly Mexican and Mexican-American neighborhood on Chicago’s southwest side. Due in large part to the efforts of Bob and his colleagues, Tejada High defies the negative, media-driven stereotype of an urban high school. Its facilities are spacious and well-maintained, its classrooms amply supplied with books and technology, and its atmosphere friendly and inviting.

Nonetheless, Tejada has long struggled to overcome its designation as a so-called “underachieving” school, and Bob was calling to tell me about what he described as a “radical plan” to change that: Beginning that fall, Tejada High would
begin requiring all of the roughly 275 members of its senior class—including special-education students and English language learners—to take a full year of Advanced Placement English Language and Composition. Bob went on to emphasize that, for him, this initiative was about justice, for he thought it scandalous that Tejada students rarely had the chance to take rigorous college-prep courses that are commonplace in Chicago’s selective magnet schools. Further, Bob said, “it’s an economic issue,” explaining that he was tired of hearing about Tejada graduates who went to college but then got stuck in remedial composition classes for which they had to pay but received no academic credit. Then he cut to the chase and asked if I would be willing to help with what he anticipated would be a difficult transition for many Tejada students and English teachers. I agreed, and so for several semesters, preservice teachers in my “Teaching of Writing” methods classes tutored each week in one of Tejada’s 12 sections of AP Composition. While I was drawn to the project because it allowed my students to work one-on-one with high school-aged writers, Bob continued to emphasize its potential to ameliorate educational inequality. As he eventually grew fond of saying, “We’re occupying AP Comp.”

My interest in this initiative evolved to a point where I conducted three semesters of ethnographic research at Tejada High, where twice weekly I observed and tutored in two AP comp classes taught by different teachers. Among the things this study confirms is that Bob’s “radical plan” is emblematic of a broader trend toward emphasizing argumentation in U.S. schools. In 2009, to correct what was perceived as ELA curricula’s overemphasis on reader-response approaches to (mostly canonical) literature, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers declared that “the ability to frame and defend an argument is particularly important to students’ readiness for college and careers” (2010b, p. 2B). Affirming these priorities, the architects of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) underscore the importance of argumentation when, under the heading “The Special Place for Argument in the Standards,” they explain that “the Standards put particular emphasis on students’ ability to write sound arguments on substantive topics and issues” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010c, p. 24). Given the vast and growing influence of the CCSS on American schools, James Warren is even more correct today than he was in 2010, when he wrote that “one of the most radical shifts in high school and college writing instruction over the past twenty years has been the move toward argument as the dominant mode” (p. 41).

It would be a mistake, however, to attribute the ascendance of argument to the CCSS alone, for this focus on argumentation has at once led to and been encouraged by scores of scholarly research projects investigating the nature of argumentation and how it is learned and deployed in various settings. In a review of well over 200 scholarly writings on argumentation published from 1985 to 2011, Newell, Beach, Smith, and VanDerHeide (2011) note that such scholarship tends to operate either from a “cognitive” research perspective that examines the effectiveness of certain pedagogical interventions in helping students learn and transfer argumentative strategies, or from a “social” perspective that explores argumentation as it is adapted
according to the variables of a given rhetorical context (pp. 278–279). Despite the variation in their methods and conclusions, these studies almost all share the aim of Newell et al., who make clear that among the principal goals of their review is to integrate the cognitive and social perspectives into “a coherent and robust approach to research that informs the teaching and learning of argumentation in educational contexts” (p. 274). Put another way, nearly all of the extensive scholarship on argumentation is driven by the same essential question, which is, “How can students be taught to write better argumentative essays?” In contrast, the questions that emerged during my time in Tejada AP Comp classrooms were these: “Why do so many literacy educators, researchers, and policy makers believe that privileging argumentative writing is a good idea in the first place, and what are the theoretical and practical consequences of this belief?”

In what follows, I will explore these questions by demonstrating that the ascendance of argument is underwritten by three commonly held assumptions: (1) that argumentative writing promotes clear and critical thinking, (2) that it provides training in the rational deliberation that is essential for a democratic citizenry, and (3) that it imparts to students a form of cultural capital that facilitates their upward academic and socioeconomic mobility. I will also critique these assumptions by exploring their origins and interrogating the theoretical commitments they represent.

Although a precise definition of an “argument” is notoriously evasive, in this essay I follow Richard Andrews (2005) and use the term to refer to an artifact or genre characterized by a contested claim supported by evidence and warrants that adhere to commonly accepted standards of reason. While this working definition is not limited to the rigid forms of argumentation frequently taught in schools, neither is it so expansive as the notion that “everything’s an argument” (Lunsford, Ruszkiewicz, & Walters, 2007), for although everything can be interpreted as an argument, I believe that this designation is often more the result of the analytical categories scholars apply to certain discourses, artifacts, or events than of their inherent features.

As I critique the assumptions that support the teaching of arguments so defined, my intention is not to suggest that argumentative writing as such is harmful or oppressive. Nor am I suggesting that we literacy educators must make an either/or choice between teaching argumentation or abandoning it entirely. Rather, I use ethnographic anecdotes from the Tejada AP Comp classes as points of departure for a largely theoretical discussion of how the present overemphasis on argumentation imposes unwarranted limits on what counts as valid thought, legitimate political subjectivity, and a feasible strategy for addressing economic inequality.

Manny, the Reluctant Neo-Kantian

Jim is a 12-year veteran teacher who does pretty much everything right. One day in his fifth-period AP Comp class, Jim distributed a packet created by the College Board of seven sources that students were to draw upon for an essay in which they were—as the instructions put it—“to argue the extent to which schools should
support individuality or conformity.” Scaffolding the activity, Jim first helped his students summarize and articulate the possible significance of the packet sources. He then reviewed the required form of the essay and gave students a graphic organizer that included boxes for their essays’ introduction and body paragraphs, along with benchmarks of features their essays should contain, listed in the margin. Moving deliberately up and down the aisles, Jim showed the students exactly what he wanted them to do and fielded questions in a way that clearly demonstrated his pedagogical expertise. I told him after class, “Jim, watching you teach is like watching Buddy Guy play the guitar.”

Most of Jim’s 21 students went right to work following his instructions, for in previous assignments the class had reviewed materials and written arguments about, among other things, whether the United States should abolish the penny and whether playing violent video games leads teenagers to antisocial behavior.

A boy named Manny, though, turned in his seat and waved me over, for we had gotten into the habit of my helping him on his essays. An only child whose parents had immigrated to Chicago from Guanajuato, Mexico, a few months before he was born, Manny had told me that he dreamed of being an auto mechanic, and although he was a fully bilingual speaker of Spanish and English, he had a history of difficulties in school, especially in reading and writing. He once told me that the last book he had read—at about a year before—was Bunnicula, a children’s story about a pet rabbit suspected of being a vampire.

Manny struggled with the AP Comp assignment. He could barely read the sources in the packet, he didn’t know what “individuality” or “conformity” meant, and even when I explained those terms to him, he was still confounded because he couldn’t decide which of the two a school should encourage. Manny didn’t like the “individuality” option because, he said, “then you’d just be thinking about yourself.” But while Manny liked the idea of conformity because, as he put it, “everybody’s learning as a group in the classroom,” he worried that if “everybody is doing everything the same,” this would eliminate desirable situations in which “different people know stuff and can teach you different things.” As an example of this teaching and learning of “different things,” Manny said that before he started kindergarten, his mother had taught him to count to 10 in English by using different-colored crayons. He then told me about the many times his father took him to a park near their house to teach him to play soccer, and that his father was teaching him to make furniture in a woodworking shop they had set up in their garage.

In hindsight, the ways in which Manny weighed his options in light of his own experiences may be read as an example of what Newell, VanDerHeide, and Wynhoff Olsen (2014) describe as an “ideational argumentative epistemology” that prioritizes the process of argumentation to “engage deeply in content and develop original ideas” (p. 97). Still, I soon felt compelled to turn our conversation back toward the requirements of Jim’s assignment, for so far Manny had ignored the packet sources and evaded a definite position about whether schools should foster individuality or conformity. By the end of the subsequent period, however, Manny had written what was recognizable as an argumentative essay in that he supported
his claim that schools should foster conformity with evidence drawn from two of the packet sources and a personal anecdote (Figure 1).

This imperative to transform Manny’s family stories and initially indecisive musings into an academic argument can, I believe, be traced in part to the inclination of many literacy educators to equate rational argumentation with good thought. When George Hillocks (2010), for instance, contends that argumentative writing is at the heart of “critical thinking,” he is referring to a process of reasoning
that has its roots in Aristotle’s syllogisms and is demonstrated in Stephen Toulmin’s (1958) conception of argument, the elements of which Hillocks describes as “a claim based on evidence of some sort, with a warrant that explains how the evidence supports the claim, backing supporting the warrants, qualifications, and rebuttals or counterarguments that refute competing claims” (Hillocks, 2010, p. 26). Hillocks declares that, lacking these elements, any thesis “is likely to be no more than a preconception or assumption or clichéd popular belief that is unwarranted and, at worst, totally indefensible” (p. 26). Similarly, Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein (2006) claim that argumentation leads to improvements not just in students’ writing but also in “their quality of thought” (p. xi). Neil Mercer (2009) affirms this presumed relationship between argumentation and cognition, concluding that socializing students to the “rational dialogue” of argumentation “helps the development of their individual intellectual capabilities” (p. 177).

To be sure, scholars have shown that arguments can take many forms and that rhetorical contexts play an important role in determining an argument’s structure, goals, and effects (Lindquist, 2002). Newell et al. (2011), for instance, posit that their review of argumentation research reveals “the need to treat argument as a set of social practices with a variety of uses across a range of different literacy events” (p. 275). Paul Prior (2005), too, contends that argumentation is an “ill-structured, messy domain” (p. 130) that requires anthropological research methods to uncover its nuances as an “embodied sociohistoric practice” (p. 131). Moreover, as Karen Lunsford (2002) has shown, even when writing instructors explicitly teach the Toulminian model of argumentation, they and their students are continually “reconstruing” the model’s key terms and processes within dynamic classroom contexts (p. 160).

Nonetheless, despite the context-dependent variety of what Richard Andrews (2005) has described as the “choreography” of argumentation (p. 110), Prior (2005) correctly describes Toulmin’s as “a normative model to assess the quality of arguments” (p. 132) in American schools. This logocentric emphasis is perhaps most clearly evident at the level of educational policy in the fact that the CCSS lists as its first “key point” in writing that “the ability to write logical arguments based on substantive claims, sound reasoning, and relevant evidence is a cornerstone of the writing standards” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010d, p. 2). Indeed, argumentation’s status as a “cornerstone” of writing instruction indicates substantial consensus around the notion that whatever Manny was doing when he was telling me about what he learned from his parents, it was when he began to formulate a well-reasoned argument that he began to think more rigorously and clearly.

Hillocks is right to trace the ascendance of argument back to the ancient Greeks, but the epistemological assumptions that underwrite argumentative writing have endured in our modern era due mostly to the writings of René Descartes and Immanuel Kant. Descartes sought to guide humanity away from the misconceptions of pre-Enlightenment thinking and establish a rational method for discovering truth. Descartes’s method begins by accepting nothing as true that he cannot clearly
recognize to be so, and initially the only thing of which he can be certain is his own existence—hence his famous dictum, “Cogito, ergo sum” (1637/1997, p. 92). Working from that initial certainty, Descartes says that we can arrive at knowledge that is “deduced from true and known principles by continuous and uninterrupted action of a mind that has a clear vision of each step in the process” (1684/1997, p. 10). Thus, to Descartes, true knowledge is established in an incremental process wherein each new truth follows from those that precede it.

In a similar way, Kant asks whether we humans can know anything that is universally true. Kant concludes that we can indeed ascertain the truth by applying what he describes as “transcendental idealism,” which is the doctrine that while we cannot experience the world except as “appearances” from our own point of view, we can know certain things about the world independent of our individual perspectives (1781/1998). Such knowledge is possible because experience itself is necessarily characterized by what Kant calls the “pure intuitions” of time and space and by “categories” like substance and causality. Therefore, to Kant, experience is not purely subjective but is ordered by these a priori features, and having established that such an objective ground exists, we have a fixed place from which to deduce things about the world and to judge the legitimacy of our own and other people’s thinking.

Descartes’ and Kant’s certainty about the objective processes that govern what we know and how we know it live on in our thesis statements, reasoned evidence, and counterarguments. Among the reasons for these thinkers’ longevity is that their views reflect and reinforce the Western philosophical tradition’s dominant paradigms for determining whether or not certain ideas are true. One of these paradigms is based on the so-called “coherence theory of truth,” which posits that a proposition is true if it can be integrated with previously known truths as part of a holistic conceptual system (Honer, Hunt, & Okholm, 1996, pp. 66–67). If this idea seems familiar to contemporary teachers and students of English, it’s because the coherence theory is foundational to the notion that an argumentative claim is valid if it follows from the evidence and warrants used to prove it.

The ascendance of argument is also driven by a second framework of Western intellectual history, the “correspondence theory of truth,” according to which true knowledge corresponds to an objective, extra-human reality made accessible through a combination of rigorous observation and abstract reasoning. Again, if this paradigm sounds familiar, it’s because the privileging of argumentation indicates widespread acceptance of the assumption that truths established by reasoned argumentation correspond to “real” truths, thereby positing argumentation as a cognitive ideal.

When, for instance, Warren (2010) writes that the analysis and evaluation required by argumentation are “all marks of higher-order thinking” (p. 41), and when Rex, Thomas, and Engel (2010) say that developing students’ ability to create “soundly reasoned arguments” promotes their “capacity to engage big ideas, important questions, and complicated problems” (p. 56), these authors’ implied corresponding claim is that thinking other than argumentation is “lower-order”
and sufficient only for contemplating small ideas, unimportant questions, or simple problems. If these writers’ assertions and the near-nationwide adoption of the CCSS are any indication, many educators are committed to the idea that thinking according to the principles of rational argumentation is the essence of good thought.

However, as Foucault has demonstrated, what people understand to be “knowledge” is not an objectively verifiable account of what’s “really real,” but the product of humans’ discursive practices. As Foucault (1972/1984) describes it in his well-known phrase, each society has its “regime of truth,” those “types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (p. 73). Thus, Foucault is interested not in discovering truths as such, but in uncovering how a particular ensemble of discursive conventions came to be accepted as the rules for separating truth from falsehood. According to Foucault, in modern Western societies these rules are centered on “the form of scientific discourse and the institutions [including schools] which produce it” (1972/1984, p. 73), and the aim of this elevation of scientific discourse is to “make rationality the telos of [hu]mankind” (1972, p. 13). To Foucault, then, the discourse of rationality—which is itself discursively produced—in turn creates knowledge that masquerades as truth, when in fact such knowledge is the result of the ways that people in specific times and places have come to think about themselves and the world.

Drawing extensively on Foucault’s work, Valerie Walkerdine (1990) has described how commonly accepted truths about “the child” and “cognitive development” are the products of pedagogic and psychological discourses (p. 202). Walkerdine insists that the central feature of these discourses is what she calls “the mastery of reason,” and she asserts that the ideal of rationality has been discursively established as embodied in the formal structure of argumentation. As Walkerdine puts it, “An argument therefore has as its component apparently the ultimate in rationality . . . : the mastery of its form” (p. 210).

Thus, Foucault and Walkerdine help us moderns understand that we have been discursively conditioned to accept the notion that our perceptions emerging from rational argumentation correspond to accurate descriptions of the world. To elevate rationality and, specifically, argumentation in this way is to suggest that there exists—independent of context or history—a form of good thought that the closest we humans can manage to approximate that form is through a well-reasoned argument. To put it another way, if Foucault is right that all societies are governed by regimes of truth, our regime is characterized by the ascendance of argument.

In my view, among the consequences of equating a good argument with good thought is that many educators have unwittingly adopted something resembling the (in)famous “great divide” theory of literacy. As many readers will likely recall, this theory posits that, because reading and writing are intrinsically accompanied by what Goody and Watt call “logico-empirical modes of thought” (1968/1988, p. 12), newly literate societies undergo a cultural revolution that ushers in “seminal intellectual innovations” (p. 19). However, the great divide theory has been to a great degree discredited for its ethnocentric implication that preliterate people’s
intellects are underdeveloped, almost child-like, in terms of their uncritical acceptance of tradition and tolerance for inconsistency. Thankfully, I know few teachers who would label their students “underdeveloped.” Still, given the ascendance of argument, I worry that in our professional conversations a new divide theory has emerged—one that posits an intellectual dichotomy not between the literate and preliterate, but between people who can write what is sanctioned as a rational argument and those who can’t.

Educators could remain untroubled by the potentially negative consequences of reason’s mastery if all students were acclimated from childhood to the logic of argumentative writing. However, as researchers have long documented, there exists a vast and beautiful variance in what Shirley Brice Heath (1983) describes as people’s “ways with words.” Moreover, feminist, queer, multicultural, and Marxist theorists have long warned that rationality has a dark side in that it normalizes the discourses of patriarchy, heterosexuality, whiteness, and capital (Butler, 1993; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2002; Kirkland, 2013; Kosofsky Sedgewick, 1990).

To be sure, as I indicated earlier, scholars of argumentation are generally amenable to the diversity of forms argumentation encompasses, citing such diversity as evidence that argumentation need not fit into the boxes on Jim’s AP Comp graphic organizer. Also, to their credit, argumentation theorists tend to justify the ascendance of argument not in terms of metaphysics but in terms of human experience. However, merely shifting the rationale for privileging argumentation from the noumenal to the phenomenal realm does not eliminate the problem that whatever is designated as “good thought” revealed through rational arguments is determined by people who are in a position to make and enforce such designations.

James Crosswhite (1996), for instance, locates argumentation’s power in rhetoric, but despite his claim that argumentation is a way for people to demonstrate their ethical commitments to each other by resolving conflicts without violence, Crosswhite does not sufficiently acknowledge that the “agreement” upon which argumentation depends and toward which it aspires often involves the coerced or hegemonic erasure of differences of opinion (p. 147). Similarly, Mercier and Sperber (2011) contend that through the process of producing and defending arguments, “reasoning is likely to drive us to good decisions . . . because better decisions tend to be easier to justify” (p. 70). However, aside from the fact that Mercier and Sperber arrive at this conclusion after explaining that people usually argue to defend previously held beliefs, these authors sidestep the problem that the justifications that matter are those that are acceptable to people positioned to make consequential decisions. Finally, Mark Turner (1991) contends that our human propensity to argue emerges from the ways in which our bilaterally symmetrical bodies function within a physical world of opposing forces. Absent from Turner’s analysis, however, is an acknowledgement that such appeals to nature have been deployed throughout history to justify oppression; nor does Turner recognize that, ultimately, people have chosen which features of human anatomy and which laws of physics are going to operate as the metaphors for valorizing particular modes of communication.
Taken together, these and other theorists (e.g., Billig, 1997) insist that the ascendance of argument is not arbitrary, but that argumentation is an enduring convention because it has proven indispensable to so many people over time and across contexts. However, as my responses to these theorists suggest, in order to believe that argumentation has inherent cognitive and social value, one must reassert the autonomous model and strip language uses from their ideological bases and consequences. One must bracket the notion that such value is not predestined in human nature or the organizing principles of the universe, but is discursively produced. One must, in other words, create a world of intellectual and communicative hierarchies and then forget that we are its creators. Unfortunately, in such a world it is also possible to forget that, in most arguments, the person with the most power just has to say, “Your argument is unreasonable,” and he wins.

Reasonable Citizens

One of the benefits of having conducted research at Tejada High for several semesters was that I was able to observe the ways in which the school’s AP Comp mandate evolved over time. Among these changes was that Jim and his colleagues began to revise their AP Comp classes by gradually replacing College Board materials with original units that addressed the argumentative writing benchmarks by connecting their students’ experiences and priorities with current political controversies.

In my second semester at Tejada, for instance, I observed a section of AP Comp co-taught by Sandy, the English Department Chair, and Peter, a special education teacher. With the 2012 presidential election approaching, Sandy and Peter led their students through a unit on U.S. immigration policy that included published statements by advocates on both sides of the so-called “amnesty” debate and an episode of a reality TV show in which a civilian “minute man” lived for a month with an undocumented family. The unit’s central text was Luis Alberto Urrea’s *The Devil’s Highway* (2004), a riveting account of a group of men known as the Yuma 14, who, in 2001, crossed the border from Mexico into southern Arizona and perished in the desert. Among the assignments Sandy and Peter included in the unit were transcribed interviews with students’ family members who had immigrated to the United States and eulogies to the Yuma 14 written as poems to coincide with the school’s Day of the Dead celebrations. The unit’s capstone assignment was to write an argumentative essay regarding whether (and how) the nation’s immigration policies should be revised.

Another unit Sandy and Peter composed centered on a controversy that, at the time, was featured prominently in the local news. The controversy arose when a Latino high school student named Herbie Pulgar won the City Clerk’s annual contest to design Chicago’s vehicle registration sticker. However, just days after Herbie received his $1,000 cash prize, it was suggested that Herbie’s design could be read as containing symbols representing his gang affiliation. The City Clerk agreed, rescinded Herbie’s award, and gave it to the runner-up—a white girl who attended one of Chicago’s elite magnet schools. Herbie was, of course, crestfallen, and the AP students delved into this controversy. They wrote rhetorical analyses
of Herbie’s design, posted responses to a blog by an anonymous Chicago police officer who was convinced that Herbie had pulled a fast one on city officials, and video-recorded their own news segments on the controversy. The unit culminated in each student’s writing an argumentative essay about whether Herbie’s design was gang-related and what, if anything, the City Council should do about the decision to strip Herbie of his prize.

Again, these two instructional units encouraged students to recognize important connections between their own experience and broader public debates. Moreover, in these units, Sandy and Peter were drawing upon their students’ prior knowledge and introducing them to a range of genres other than formal argumentation. Additionally, however, both units were designed so that all preliminary assignments culminated in the writing of an argumentative essay, and in this way Sandy and Peter signaled to their students that the most effective way to add their voices to public conversations is through a well-reasoned argument.

To educators sanguine about the ascendance of argument, Sandy and Peter were doing exactly the right thing to foster the rational public deliberation that is widely held to be essential to democracy. Graff and Birkenstein (2006), for instance, insist that learning to write arguments will help students not only in academic settings but also in “the wider world” of “responsible public discourse” (pp. 2–3). Hillocks (2011) agrees, declaring that being able to compose and evaluate arguments is “a skill critical to participating in a democratic society” (p. xvi). Similarly, according to Rex, Thomas, and Engel (2010), habits of critical thinking honed through argumentation are “especially important for the future health of our democracy” (p. 56). Indeed, the notion that argumentation is the language of democracy has become a leitmotif of our professional literature, one that recurs in the CCSS, which states that students who meet the literacy Standards will “reflexively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010b, p. 3).

Proponents of arguing for democracy emphasize that in order for argumentation to render such public benefits, it must be properly understood as less confrontational than collaborative. For instance, Doerr-Stevens, Beach, and Boeser (2011) maintain that argumentation helps students gain a more thorough understanding of perspectives contrary to their own, thereby inspiring “new social imaginations” that are integral for engaging in positive social action (p. 38). From this point of view, the goal of arguing in public is not to vanquish an opponent, but to engage in conversations in which everyone wins by introducing each other to new ideas and reaching decisions that promote the general welfare.

Dominant Western views regarding why and how people should govern themselves are, of course, largely shaped by the writings of Enlightenment figures such as John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Charles-Louis Montesquieu. However, the philosophical emphasis on rationality in directing human affairs—that sort of rationality embodied in the form of an argument—has no more influential
proponent than Kant. According to Kant, practical reason (reason that determines what people should do) can only be rightly exercised by an autonomous human will that is separated from the vicissitudes of the phenomenal world, thus granting us a “transcendental freedom” to act on reason alone. We exercise this freedom, Kant asserts, when we determine our choices by looking to rational principles that govern what we should do regardless of our particular interests or circumstances (1788/2012, p. 61). Kant maintains that humans have a unique power to shield their actions from the corrupting influence of the “desires and incitements that await us in the world of sense” (1785/2002, p. 256), and as Kant puts it, “that power is reason” (1785/2002, p. 251, original italics).

Kant’s metaphysics of ethical decision-making has had a profound influence among political philosophers who contend that democracy depends upon rational deliberation guided by disinterested principles like liberty, justice, and equality. Among such thinkers is Hannah Arendt (1958/1989), who prizes a public sphere devoted to accommodating a plurality of actors whose collective power is based on rational persuasion (pp. 188–199). John Rawls (1971/1999) would pursue democratic “justice as fairness” by placing us behind a “veil of ignorance” to ensure that our deliberations will not be swayed by the personal interests involved in a particular dispute (p. 118). Jurgen Habermas would solve the “legitimation crisis” that often afflicts political systems by institutionalizing rational modes of discourse wherein argumentation functions as a “court of appeal” in which people can come to an agreement about competing claims (as cited in Andrews, 2005, p. 108). Seyla Benhabib (1996) captures the Kantian legacy in these and like-minded writers when she contends that the practical rationality embodied in democratic institutions cultivates a culture-transcending principle of “egalitarian reciprocity” (p. 78). This principle, Benhabib explains, stipulates that everyone has the same right to initiate new topics into public discussion, set forth a point of view, challenge another person’s assumptions, and insist upon evidence—in other words, to argue with each other as equals.

Given its intellectual pedigree and promised utility as a safeguard against arbitrary rule or anarchy, it is hardly surprising that this notion of the interdependence among democracy, rational public deliberation, and argumentation is widely accepted. Moreover, it enjoys a common-sense appeal: Who wouldn’t, after all, prefer a civilized debate to the decrees of a despot or the demands of a mob? However, this ideal of reasonable citizens arguing their way to sensible decisions is complicated by at least four issues. First, in order to assert a reciprocal relationship between argumentation and democracy, one must ignore the fact that people have unequal access to the power that would enable them to participate meaningfully in public conversations, and if someone is not in a position to insist that others listen to and act upon her views, her argument can simply be ignored.

Second, history and current U.S. politics are replete with examples of how rational arguments supported by overwhelming evidence get trumped by ideology. Because there is no neutral ground where individuals can converse unencumbered by their values and prejudices, these preexisting inclinations are the lenses through which people assess the validity of others’ claims, evidence, and warrants. If I be-
lieve, for instance, that a cap-and-trade system on carbon dioxide is a prelude to tyranny, yet another ultra-rational report documenting global warming is unlikely to convince me otherwise.

Third, it seems only reasonable to insist that even though argumentative skills don’t guarantee access to political deliberation, lacking such skills virtually ensures that a person will be excluded from the public sphere. However, this insistence that argumentation is a necessary (albeit insufficient) requirement of political agency dismisses substantial evidence that the most effective forms of democratic participation emerge not from rational argumentation but from identity and class-based solidarity (Schutz, 2010), and that people who are the most politically active are also the least likely to engage in deliberations with those who hold opposing views (Mutz, 2006).

Fourth, tying democracy to rational argumentation greatly restricts the kinds of thought and action considered permissible in the public sphere. Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordón (1999) have coined the phrase “democracy’s edges,” which is useful in exploring such restrictions. To Shapiro and Hacker-Cordón, democracy’s edges refers to the boundaries that separate people who do or do not have the opportunity to participate in public discourse. However, democracy’s edges can be understood in a related but equally useful way, and that is to explore not just who is included in the public realm, but what they can do there. In other words, for my purposes, the concept of democracy’s edges foregrounds a central question that, in my view, is never satisfactorily answered by those who insist upon democracy’s dependence on rational argumentation: In the public sphere, where should we place the boundaries of what constitutes rational thoughts, words, and deeds? Or, to put it another way, at what point (and by whose standards) do we determine that a certain way of thinking and acting has crossed a line to become irrational and, therefore, illegitimate and subject to public sanction?

Several political theorists would expand democracy’s edges or even insist that they be dismantled and reconstructed in response to evolving sociopolitical conditions. Chantal Mouffe (2000), for instance, advocates an “agonistic” model of democratic politics, one that recognizes the impossibility of ever fully adjudicating not just particular issues, but also the terms and forms in which such issues will be contested. For his part, Slavoj Žižek (2008) describes democracy as an empty signifier that stands for nothing except its own deliberative processes, and to Žižek these processes are merely a way to suppress radical ideas that would actually change the way people live. Similarly, Jodi Dean (2009) describes deliberative democracy as a “neoliberal fantasy,” a system that “shifts political responsibility onto a discursive process where it can be perpetually deferred” (p. 92), the practical result of which is the re-entrenchment of the status quo. To be clear, these writers do not object to democracy’s ideals. Instead, their indignation is directed at an uncritical faith in deliberative procedures that they insist lead to little more than the domestication of potentially transforming political theory.

I do not raise these challenges to deliberative democracy lightly. I understand that releasing democracy from its argumentative paradigm may be reckless, that doing so could ultimately lead to totalitarian obscenities like the Stalinist purges...
or the Cambodian killing fields. Still, the question of where to draw democracy’s edges remains. Presumably, for a high school student to write a carefully reasoned letter to a principal objecting to the dismissal of an inspiring teacher would likely be deemed legitimate, but what if that student were to organize a lunchtime walkout? What if a woman violated a Montgomery city ordinance by refusing to move to the back of the bus, or a boisterous crowd occupied and disrupted proceedings at the Wisconsin State Capitol building? What if LGBTQ patrons of a New York City tavern were to become so exasperated by police harassment that they finally refused to allow themselves to be beaten, handcuffed, and herded onto a paddy wagon? What if unionized workers were to defy a governor’s orders and forcefully repel Pinkerton detectives outside the Homestead Steel Works in Pennsylvania? What if, after having his vegetable cart confiscated, a man were to sit down in the city square, light himself on fire, and start a revolution? Are these examples of rational—and therefore legitimate—political activity?

These are, I grant, complex questions, but I raise them to underscore my point that insofar as we educators elevate argumentation as the ideal form of political participation to the extent that it occludes other forms of collective action, we present to our students a range of options that severely limits what they are permitted to say and do as citizens. More precisely, a narrow understanding of “democracy as argumentation” delegitimizes more agonistic or even revolutionary models of public activism, models that at times must be followed to build institutions and foster modes of daily human association that are worthy of being called “democratic.” The U.S. Declaration of Independence is rightly known as one of history’s most masterful arguments (though all evidence suggests that King George III was unmoved by it). But Jefferson’s words would have been inconsequential had they not been accompanied by the treasonous events at Lexington and Concord, Saratoga, and Yorktown. As this and my previous examples suggest, the ascendance of argument is thus a politically conservative trend, for to insist exclusively on rational argumentation as the discourse of the public sphere is to keep people safely away from the edges of democracy, where they might do impolite, illegal, or even violent things in their struggle for justice.

The Myth of Argumentation as Cultural Capital

Behind Tejada High, across the street from the staff parking lot, is a brass-works plant that is one of the neighborhood’s few remaining manufacturing facilities. Next to the brass-works gate and against a brick wall sit a couple of wooden benches, where on pleasant days employees often gather to eat lunch or have a smoke. One of these workers, Ray, told me that his parents had moved to Chicago from Georgia in the 1950’s and that he had been a unionized employee in the plant for over 30 years. “My wife and me,” Ray said, “we have a house in Back-of-the-Yards [a Chicago neighborhood] and three grown-up kids. This has been a good job for me.”

A lot of Tejada alumni would be grateful for a job that provided as much financial stability as Ray’s has. Two such former students, Linda and Eric, had been Manny’s classmates in Jim’s AP Comp class, and both of them were accomplished
argumentative writers. Linda aspired to be a photographer, and she was thrilled to have been accepted to a well-respected arts school downtown, where she began classes in the fall term after her Tejada graduation. However, a couple of months into her first semester of college, Linda was struggling to keep up with her studies because she couldn’t afford to quit her part-time jobs at a car wash and a retail clothing store. When I spoke with her a few days before Halloween, she told me that she planned to take the spring semester off to earn money for tuition.

Eric was a serious reader who, as a Tejada senior, liked to talk to me about the thick Stephen King paperbacks he carried around in his backpack. But when I met him several months after graduation at a Starbucks near where he lived in the enclosed back porch of his mother’s rented house, he told me that he still hadn’t found a job. Eric was hopeful, though, that he’d get a response to the online application he had filled out a few days before to work at PetSmart. If Eric were to get the position, he said, he would earn the minimum wage, which in Illinois is $8.25 per hour. At that rate, Eric’s annual gross income would be $16,500. When I called him a few weeks later, he still hadn’t heard anything from the folks at PetSmart, and he had no other prospects.

Experiences like Linda’s and Eric’s were well known to Tejada seniors, many of whom worried that they would soon face similar challenges as they transitioned from high school to college or a difficult job market. With about two weeks left in the school year, Sandy and Peter had their students deliver a PowerPoint presentation in which they looked back on their high school years and described their hopes for the future. Although the students had mixed feelings about their time at Tejada, nearly all of them expressed a fear of economic insecurity. Standing at the front of the darkened classroom next to the projector, Roberto said, “I’m going to go to Harold Washington [a local city college], but I’ll need to work, like, at least two jobs because I can’t get a lot of money from my parents.” Carlos was excited that he would soon be attending Western Illinois University, but he added, “I’m kinda scared that money’s not going to be enough, ’cause these days you’re not really guaranteed a job after college.” As Sarah looked to her future, she confessed that she worried most about “being in debt and being homeless.” Sarah then went off-script and elaborated: “That just, like, scares the crap out of me. My family is always in debt, and I hate owing people money. And if I go broke, it’ll be like I’ve screwed up my entire life.” With over 94% of its students designated as “low-income,” Tejada High is permeated by such fears, for despite the youthful energy of students like Roberto, Carlos, and Sarah, the school is imbued with a presence similar to that of the black dog that Winston Churchill used to describe his recurring depression. At Tejada High, though, the black dog ambling through the hallways and lurking in classroom corners is poverty.

James Gee (2008) has written that concerns about literacy are “often a displacement of deeper social fears, an evasion of more significant problems” (pp. 31–32). In my view, the Tejada students’ fears of financial troubles may be understood as individual instances of Americans’ collective anxiety regarding our nation’s economic future, and a centerpiece of our response to this anxiety has been the
most recent attempts at education reform. In much the same way that *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1984) urged a previous generation of Americans to restore through schooling “our once unchallenged preeminence in industry, commerce, and science” (p. 1), the CCSS pronounce that “with students, parents, and teachers . . . working together for shared goals, we can ensure that students make progress each year and graduate from school prepared to succeed in college and in a modern workforce” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010a). Given such assurances that students who meet the Standards will be “college- and career-ready,” and given argumentation’s exalted status in the literacy standards, argumentative writing has emerged as a significant aspect of the discourse that posits education as among the most promising solutions to America’s economic problems. We can, so this thinking goes, educate our way to prosperity, and argumentation is a key component of that education.

This assumption that learning to argue effectively—as a foundational requirement for academic success—will pay economic dividends seems at first to make perfect sense. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), in 2014 both the employment rate and median income of people with at least a college degree was roughly three times that of those who had attained at most a high school diploma. However, the notion that college and career readiness broadens the path to economic prosperity is undermined by several problems. First, even if students learn to argue well as part of their educational training, being prepared for higher education is not the same as having a realistic opportunity to attend college. Although all of the Tejada students I mentioned above were academically ready for college, most of them couldn’t afford it. Moreover, even if young people could gain access to postsecondary schooling by securing financial aid, it’s not obvious that they would ultimately benefit from joining the ranks of Americans whose collective student loan debt now exceeds $1 trillion and is far outpacing wage growth for college graduates (Bidwell, 2013, p. 1). Thus, the idea of college “readiness” needs to be reconceptualized to acknowledge that it depends at least as much on the numbers on a student’s family bank statement as it does on the letters on her high school transcript.

But even if these financial constraints were removed by offering low-income students free college admission, it is unlikely that such measures would, on a large scale, brighten poor students’ financial futures. The fact that many teachers and policy makers believe exactly the opposite (i.e., that the knowledge and skills acquired through schooling are what students need to rise from poverty) is, I believe, due in large part to educators’ widespread misappropriation of the work of Pierre Bourdieu, especially his ideas regarding the utility of “cultural capital.”

Bourdieu (1986/1997) describes capital as existing in three interrelated forms: cultural, social, and economic. Cultural capital refers to those cultural and linguistic competencies displayed by or in the possession of the dominant classes. These competencies include ways of talking and behaving, bodies of knowledge, and academic credentials. Examples of cultural capital are knowing the right questions
to ask at a job interview, a college diploma, or an awareness of which fork to use at an elegant dinner party. Social capital is the advantage that comes from access to social networks that allow individuals to pursue their interests with the support of others. Economic capital, to Bourdieu, is money or anything (like property or equities) that can be directly exchanged for it. Among Bourdieu’s important insights regarding these types of capital is that they are convertible from one form to another. For instance, the cultural capital of knowing how to comport oneself at a formal dinner party facilitates the acquisition of social capital by making it easier to join privileged groups, and economic capital can be converted into cultural capital by, say, buying opera tickets or paying tuition at elite schools.

This notion of capital’s convertibility is what makes Bourdieu of such interest to educators, for Bourdieu argues that schools are among the most important sites where such conversions occur. As researchers drawing on Bourdieu’s work have pointed out (Willis, 1977), because the culture of the dominant classes is arbitrarily privileged in schools (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 60), and because the wealthy already have cultural capital due primarily to their family upbringings, schools tend to reproduce the dominant culture and therefore function as part of the sociocultural machinery that keeps rich people rich and poor people poor.

Encouraged by research that found a correlation between students’ cultural capital and their levels of academic success (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985), educators have seized on Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital’s convertibility to popularize a “cultural mobility model” of schooling. According to this model, cultural capital can be taught and therefore serve as “a route to upward mobility for the less privileged groups of society” (Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 1996). Thus, according to the logic of the cultural mobility model, among the best things we can do in English classes for disadvantaged students is to teach them cultural capital in the form of knowing how to speak and write the language of the academy—which is to say, we should teach them argumentative writing.

However, the fundamental problem with relying on Bourdieu to set forth a model of cultural capital as a means to socioeconomic mobility is that such a reading is contrary to what he actually says. To be sure, Bourdieu makes clear that cultural capital plays a role in reproducing social and economic privilege. But this is not the same as saying that cultural capital produces social and economic capital for those who don’t already have it. For although Bourdieu asserts that cultural capital can be converted into social and economic capital, he emphasizes that such conversion can only occur “in certain conditions” (1986/1997, p. 47). With rare exceptions, those conditions are that a person is already well connected and rich.

According to Bourdieu, it is unlikely that members of the dominated classes will be able to parlay cultural capital into social and economic capital because there is no such thing as a purely “cultural” slice of life. Rather, the designation and deployment of cultural capital takes place within the “field” of existing class relations and the structures of political economy that sustain them (Bourdieu, 1979, 1986/1997). Crucially, Bourdieu contends that within this field, “economic capital is at the root of all other types of capital” and is “at the root of their effects”
In other words, according to Bourdieu, what counts as cultural capital (use that fork; write this way) is determined by those who possess economic capital, and the ability to use cultural capital to one’s advantage depends upon a person’s already having the financial means of doing so.

Bourdieu’s insight that economic capital is the root of cultural and social capital is overlooked by educators who believe that teaching students cultural capital will enable them to emerge from poverty. For while Bourdieu concedes that schools can credential the knowledge that permits the social mobility of “a limited category of individuals,” he insists that what he calls this “controlled mobility” only perpetuates the structure of class relations by preserving the illusion of meritocracy and by avoiding the social unrest that might arise if members of the dominated classes began to see their domination as hopeless (1973, p. 56).

To Bourdieu, then, cultural capital is not a socially transformative concept, but a descriptive and ultimately conservative one. Nonetheless, while his analyses do not constitute an endorsement of the status quo, his suggestions for mitigating the role of cultural capital in reproducing inequality directly contradict the views of those who advocate advancing equality by teaching students what Lisa Delpit has famously described as the “culture of power” (1995). Rather, to promote equality, Bourdieu insists that people should, first, stop “recognizing” (i.e., accepting) the symbolic power of privileged cultural forms and, second, disrupt the symbolically maintained order by asserting “a heterodox (or critical) discourse . . . which actualizes the potential power of the dominated classes” (1979, p. 82).

Therefore, according to Bourdieu, if we educators are offended by the fact that some people have unfair advantages because of the cultural capital they inherit from their families, the proper response is not to teach everyone the culture of power, but to challenge the idea that dominant cultural forms have an inherent value that justifies their elevated place in the hierarchy of what we want students to know. For my purposes here, Bourdieu teaches us ELA educators that our egalitarian commitments will be best served if we stop treating argumentative writing as a form of cultural capital by exalting it over other forms of communication and—in doing so—being complicit in reproducing the academic and economic benefits that may come to a small number of students from learning to think, talk, and write like the well-connected and wealthy.

Bourdieu’s repudiation of the cultural mobility model is echoed in the work of scholars who are similarly skeptical of the presumed financial rewards of schooling. Jean Anyon (2005), for instance, insists that “the fact that economic policies yield widespread low-wage work even among an increasingly educated workforce . . . seriously strains the credibility of . . . school reform as a solution to the problems of the urban poor” (p. 29). Similarly, John Marsh (2011) contends that educational parity does little to reduce economic inequity because education does not significantly affect the job market that graduates will enter. As Marsh explains, because education is a “supply-side” approach to job creation (that is, “it improves the quality of the worker,” not the number or quality of jobs she may potentially occupy), and because the greatest U.S. job growth in the coming decade is projected
to come from the lowest end of the service sector, even well-educated Americans who fill those jobs will not earn a living wage (2011, p. 72). Given such economic conditions, Marsh is entirely right to ask, “An education may enable the rise of any one poor or low-income person. But will it enable the rise of all or even most of them?” (2011, p. 67).

Marsh’s answer is, “No, it won’t,” and his response is consistent with the conclusions of scholars whose research is of special interest to English teachers in that it discredits the presumed relationship between socioeconomic mobility and the acquisition of cultural capital in the form of literacy. Brian Street (1995), for instance, has repeatedly documented that literacy campaigns raise “false hopes about what the acquisition of literacy means for job prospects and social mobility” (p. 17), and these hopes remain unrealized because, as Allan Luke (1996) has pointed out, the possession of cultural capital allegedly generated in literacy training “is neither necessary nor sufficient for economic and social power” but can only be realized “through a series of contingencies which arise in the social and cultural field” (p. 330). For the Tejada High seniors, because those contingencies (like the financial means to attend college, social networks that lead to well-paying jobs, and an economy in which such jobs are available) were not in evidence, these students’ abilities to write effective arguments had no discernable economic payoff.

I am not suggesting that we should be entirely cynical about education, nor do I think that it’s pointless to help students grow as literate persons. I recognize schools as places where young people develop important peer and mentor relationships, and as an English teacher I know that reading and writing can be means of personal enrichment and civic engagement, that literacy can help us pay attention, shape who we are, foster empathy, comprehend the world, and imagine how it might be better. Moreover, I’m sympathetic to educators who view teaching argumentation as an ethical obligation in the sense that possessing such skills seems to offer—if not a guarantee—at least the increased likelihood that some students will have access to the colleges and careers they choose.

That said, among the things I learned from the experiences of the Tejada AP Comp students is that the ascendance of argument is an individualistic response that distracts us from implementing effective solutions to the systemic problem of inequality. For this reason, we educators should resist the inclination to tie educational success to economic outcomes. I say so not only because trying to fix a broken economy merely by improving schools will not work, but also because when we rely on education to solve economic problems, it’s a short step to blame schools in times of high unemployment and sluggish growth—thereby making public education ever more vulnerable to privatization and exploitation by corporate profiteers. Moreover, when we allow ourselves to be seduced into being what Bourdieu and Passerson (1990) describe as misguided “devotees of the cult of the omnipotence of schooling” (p. 43), we reinforce the alleged meritocracy in our country by perpetuating the notion that people deserve to be poor because they aren’t smart enough or didn’t work hard enough as students. And finally, as I suggested above, every time we have a conversation about the importance of educa-
tion to economic prosperity, there is a conversation we are not having—one that interrogates structural causes of poverty, explores ways to ensure genuine equality of opportunity, and raises questions about whether it is ethical or sustainable to tolerate income and wealth disparities not seen since the time of the robber barons. For insofar as educators operate as purveyors of the egalitarian myth of cultural capital, we exaggerate the benefits of schools and of mastering the argumentative discourse we have arbitrarily designated as a requirement for academic success. In doing so, we allay our economic anxieties in a way that keeps us from having to face the inconvenient truth that if we as a citizenry want people to have better jobs and adequate food, shelter, and health care, we have to make the political and economic policy decisions that will make these things more widely accessible than they are now.

Conclusion: Argumentation and Other Ways of Being

As I’ve been arguing throughout this essay, I believe that the ascendance of argument is based largely on assumptions about argumentation’s capacity to release human potential by enabling people to think more clearly, act more judiciously as citizens, and secure for themselves and others freedom from want. However, as I’ve also suggested, the overemphasis on argumentation renders illegible other, nondominant modes of contemplation and expression, and thus delegitimizes actions that grow from them. In this way, the ascendance of argument limits our understandings of who we humans are and what we are capable of because it attends to only a tiny part of the communicative spectrum we occupy. For this reason, I believe that our preoccupation with teaching and assessing arguments—despite the vast human and financial resources that have been devoted to it—is profoundly unambitious.

Given argumentation scholars’ ongoing research agendas and the growing influence of the CCSS in American schools, to stand against the ascendance of argument may seem quixotic. This is why, when I need encouragement, I sometimes watch a YouTube video bookmarked in my Web-browser. The video features the Russian dissident and renowned cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, who, while in Paris in 1989 when he heard of the fall of the Berlin Wall, did something peculiar. While political scientists and historians appropriately began the process of documenting and debating the causes and consequences of the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc, Rostropovich rushed to the airport and caught the first flight he could get to Berlin. There, he took a cab to the foot of the Wall, only to realize that he had forgotten something important. So he walked across the street, knocked on the door of a stranger, and borrowed a kitchen chair. He then returned to the Wall, removed his cello from its case, sat down, and began to play—Bach’s Second Suite for Solo Cello in D Minor.

In his impromptu performance before a small group of onlookers, this aging cellist was, by my lights, a master teacher, and among his enduring lessons for us English teachers is that, like making music, writing is, as Robert Yagelski (2011) has so thoughtfully described it, a way of being in the world and in relationship with others. It follows, I think, that we writing teachers must safeguard oppor-
tunities in our curricula and pedagogy to gather ourselves and our students into conversations in which we seek not just to scrutinize, critique, and refute, but to share and be receptively present with others. In such conversations, while we may sometimes argue, we will also value all of our sometimes-mysterious human aspects and capacities, foster diverse forms of their expression, and honor the countless reasons why we choose—or need—to write.

NOTES
1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. The principal design of this research was ethnographic case study, and its initial purpose was to document and analyze the effects on teachers and students of mandating for all students a college-prep course emphasizing argumentative academic writing. The site selection was due to my personal relationship with a Tejada administrator and to the school’s uniqueness among Chicago public schools in requiring all seniors to take AP Composition. The two class sections selected as case studies were chosen because they represented the academic range of Tejada students taking the course—a range that included students who planned to attend college and those whose academic histories would typically have excluded them from an AP course. My role in these classes included observing full-class instructional sessions and participating as a tutor for individual students or small groups. Data were collected in the form of field notes, artifacts such as teachers’ handouts and student writing, audio-recordings of full-class sessions and conversations with students during tutoring sessions, and audio-recordings of open-ended interviews with teachers and students outside of class. These data were open-coded for emerging themes (Dyson & Genishi, 2007), such as the origin and types of the teachers’ instructional materials, the teachers’ pedagogical methods, the objectives of the teachers’ lessons and instructional units, and the students’ diverse attitudinal and performative responses to the AP Comp curriculum. Analyses of these data resulted in an evolving focus (Glaser & Strauss, 2006) on the teachers’ revisions to the AP Comp curriculum and the questions these revisions raised regarding the rationale for and advisability of immersing all students in a writing curriculum with a heavy emphasis on argumentation. I explored these questions in weekly concept memos summarizing my findings and bringing them into conversation with scholarly research and other educational discourses related to argumentative writing. These concept memos necessitated an expansion of my research design to include a theoretical analysis of the claims made by scholars and educational policy makers regarding the value of argumentation, as well as the assumptions on which those claims are based. The focus of this essay is an examination of the theoretical commitments upon which these claims and assumptions rely.
3. I acknowledge the irony and apparent tension that arises from the fact that this essay is an argument against what I see as the overemphasis on argumentative writing in schools. However, I hope that my use of this discursive form will be understood not as a refutation of my central point but as a practical acknowledgement of scholarly conventions and the expectations of readers and editors.

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