10.

Putting Pragma-Dialectics into Practice

Frans H. van Eemeren and Bart Garssen

A Method for Critical Reflection on Argumentative Discourse

However one defines "critical thinking," it is clear that arguing plays a central role. And arguing is a propensity that everyone seems to have — at least anyone who has acquired language. Whether educated or not, everyone uses arguments in almost every conceivable situation — in deliberations at work, in civil conversations, and in interpersonal "fights." One might easily conclude that everyone knows how to argue. This is the impression that might be gleaned from letters to the editor in the local newspaper or overhearing one's neighbours debating whose turn it is to take the dog out. The apparent ease with which people argue might be taken as proof that argumentation is something one does not need to learn. But those who have studied argumentative practice more carefully know better. They know that argumentative competence depends on a complex array of insights, dispositions, and skills.

These insights, dispositions, and skills are in many ways distinct and, as a rule, relative and gradual. They are distinct because argumentative competence involves (at the very least) analytic, evaluative, and productive qualities. They are relative in the sense that one may be competent in dealing appropriately with some argumentative "action types" (or aspects of these types), but much less competent in dealing with others (van Eemeren 2004). They

are gradual in the sense that people possess these insights, dispositions, and skills to a greater or lesser extent.

One of the goals of the "**pragma-dialectical**" research program is the attempt to examine and improve argumentative practice, and hence critical thinking, in all of its diversity (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, 31). Such improvement can be achieved by analyzing argumentative conduct in various kinds of practices (or "action types"), and developing well-motivated proposals for "structural" changes. Improvements in critical thinking can also be achieved through education. To enhance argumentative competence in the latter way we have established a long-term project at the University of Amsterdam that aims to teach and develop the argumentative insights, dispositions, and skills of our (and other) students.

We believe that critical thinking education should not — and cannot — consist only of the teaching of argumentative skills. Instead, the teaching of these skills needs to be integrated into a more comprehensive program which stimulates a critical attitude that fosters key critical thinking dispositions and systematic reflection on the theoretical insights that lie behind the teaching method. In our view, skills cannot be sensibly developed without reference to the insights that shape argumentation theory as a whole. Practically speaking, this means that our teaching methods reflect all the insights relevant to the analysis, evaluation, and production of argumentative discourse gained in the research conducted in the philosophical, theoretical, empirical, and analytical parts of the pragma-dialectical research program (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, 9).

A pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation concentrates, in the first place, on the potential role that argumentation plays in resolving differences of opinion in accordance with certain critical standards of reasonableness. In our education program, this is reflected in an effort to explain systematically how different types of argumentative discourses and texts can best be produced, analyzed, and evaluated. A useful point of departure in the present context is a review of the four meta-theoretical starting points that guide our work methodologically. In explaining these starting

points, we will demonstrate how we employ them in dealing with the different aspects of argumentative competence. We will use them as a basis for an explanation of testing and assessment within the pragma-dialectical framework.

The Meta-Theoretical Starting Points of **Pragma-Dialectics**

From the pragma-dialectical viewpoint, argumentation is a method of overcoming doubt about the acceptability of a standpoint or criticism of a standpoint. "Critical discussion" (the argumentative exchange by which a difference of opinion can be resolved) tests the tenability of the standpoint(s) at issue against reasonable attacks in the form of doubt or criticism. A difference of opinion is solved if and only if the protagonist, as a result of a critical discussion, gives up his or her original standpoint(s) or the antagonist no longer doubts its (their) acceptability. A critical discussion cannot guarantee that the protagonist and antagonist will no longer disagree. Rather, it is an instrument for managing disagreement. In its absence, the most powerful people simply have things their way or persuade others by coercion or other irrational means. After a critical discussion ends, a new discussion may start, so that the flux of opinions continues.

In determining what counts as a reasonable way of conducting a critical discussion, pragma-dialecticians examine argumentative discourse starting from four meta-theoretical principles, which can be described as follows.

1. *Functionalization*. All language activity is treated as a purposeful act. Verbal expressions used in argumentative discourse and texts are treated as speech acts which have "identity" and "correctness" conditions (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, 52).
2. *Externalization*. The obligations that are created by the (explicit or implicit) performance of certain speech acts in a specific context of argumentative discourse (accompanying such terms as "accept" and "disagree") are understood as

public commitments that accompany these speech acts (and not in terms of internal, private states of mind; see van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, 54-5).

3. *Socialization*. The public commitments that accompany speech acts are understood in terms of the interaction between a speaker or writer and other people. We distinguish between the different interactional roles played by the people involved in the exchange and we view the speech acts performed as parts of an argumentative dialogue between the parties (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, 56).

4. *Dialectification*. Language activities are regarded as part of an attempt to resolve a difference of opinion in accordance with critical norms of reasonableness. Dialectification is achieved by regarding the speech acts performed in an argumentative exchange as speech acts that should be in agreement with the rules for conducting a critical discussion aimed at resolving a difference of opinion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, 57).

In this chapter, we want to show how they also can help to shape the practical estate, in particular developing a teaching program and tests needed to assess students' critical thinking skills and insight.

In our educational program, we begin by teaching students to apply theoretical insights to the analysis of argumentative discourse. A second part of optimal practice assesses discourse using the norms and criteria provided by the pragma-dialectical model of critical discussion. In this context, the rules for conducting a critical discussion allow students to reach well-considered decisions about those moves in discourse which should be considered reasonable and those which should be considered fallacious. In this way, they allow an optimal analysis and evaluation of a discourse, which can serve as a basis for the last part of students' optimal practice — producing a satisfactory

argumentative speech or essay which plays a constructive role in argumentative debate.

The Analysis of Argumentation: Constructing an Analytic Overview

In constructing an analytic overview of a critical discussion, pragma-dialectics identifies standpoints and arguments, determines discussion stages, reconstructs implicit premises, and analyzes argumentation structures and argument schemes. So understood, an analytic overview allows the systematic evaluation of an argumentative discussion. Because argumentation is constructed as an exchange between two parties, the construction of an analytic overview begins with the identification of the dispute and the parties involved. The student-as-analyst must indicate standpoints at issue and the dialectical roles of the parties: who is the protagonist — the person obliged to defend a standpoint; and who is the antagonist — the person who doubts the acceptability of that standpoint and criticizes the protagonist's argumentation? (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, 16).

Because an external point of view (i.e., externalization) is assumed, students are not taught to focus on the deeper motives arguers may have for putting forward a certain standpoint or expressing doubts. In principle, it does not matter if Jane Doe, the one party, is a Democrat and John Doe, the other party, a Republican. It does not matter that the argument may be psychologically motivated by personal grudges which are the result of a divorce. We teach students to focus on the publicly assumed discussion roles, and the rights and obligations implied by the positions that the arguers have taken on.

Having identified the positions of the interlocutors, the utterances that count as standpoints, and the roles of the discussants, the students look at the various discussion stages. In the ideal model for a critical discussion we identify four stages: a "confrontation" stage, in which the difference of opinion becomes clear; an "opening" stage, in which the parties' procedural and

substantive commitments are identified; an "argumentation" stage, in which the protagonist defends his or her standpoint by means of argumentation and the antagonist attacks this argumentation by asking critical questions; and a "concluding" stage, in which the parties determine whether the protagonist's standpoint has been successfully defended and who has "won" the exchange (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, 35).

Each of these four stages has its particular sub-goal and various utterances that are relevant for achieving these sub-goals. In the classroom, it is important to point out very clearly that argumentative reality differs, by definition, from the ideal model of a critical discussion. In many cases, the opening stage is implicit, but even in these cases the starting points accepted by disputants are important and it is vital that the student-as-analyst establish the starting points that are accepted by each party. Students must also understand that even when, on the face of it, there does not seem to be a critical discussion (or a stage of one), except when it is clear that the higher-order conditions are not fulfilled, the discussion should still be understood and treated as critical. Distinguishing the stages in an argumentative exchange is often the crux of a good analysis.

After distinguishing the stages in an argumentative exchange, an analytic overview considers the arguments presented in the argumentation. This analysis is not as straightforward as the step-by-step rules that characterize most exercises in formal deductive logic, and requires the identification of explicit and implicit elements of the discourse. Students must learn to recognize linguistic cues that indicate arguments and standpoints. Speech act theory and the theory of conversational implicatures can help them reach well-motivated decisions about what is communicated in argumentative exchanges (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Snoeck Henkemans 2002, 37).

The next task in the analytic overview establishes the way in which the various arguments in the discourse or text are interrelated (what we call "the argumentation structure of the discourse" (van Eemeren et al. 1996, 16). Argumentation may consist of one argument, such as the following:

1. We should replace Styrofoam cups with paper cups. [Why?]

1.1. It would be better for the environment.

Argumentation always aims at overcoming the (potential) doubt of an antagonist or anticipating possible critique of the standpoint. In this way it captures the spirit of "critical thinking" — much in the way Johnson (this volume) characterizes an aspect of the dialectical component of critical thinking.

Of course, much more complex argumentation structures are possible. They often contain "subordinate" argumentation:

1. We should replace Styrofoam cups with paper cups. [Why?]

1.1. It would be better for the environment. [How so?]

1.1.1. Paper cups are biodegradable.

In another type of complex argumentation, more arguments are put forward to defend the same standpoint. These arguments anticipate, or react to, criticism against the arguments from the stand- point expressed earlier, and they attempt to overcome this criticism by putting forward "coordinative" argumentation:

1. You're wrong. We shouldn't replace Styrofoam with paper cups. [Why?]

i. Paper comes from trees and we need to preserve trees. [How so?]

ii. Trees provide the oxygen we all breathe. [Can't we use recycled paper for paper cups?]

iii. Recycled paper can't fill the need for disposable cups.

Instead of trying to anticipate the objections to an argument (and trying to parry these objections), an arguer may make a series of independent attempts to defend his or her standpoint. In this case,

the separate attempts to defend the standpoint are by themselves (considered to be) conclusive. The argumentation structure is "multiple":

1. We shouldn't replace Styrofoam cups with paper cups.
[Why not?]

1.1. It would be bad for the environment.

1.2. It would be too expensive.

The standpoint defended by multiple arguments still stands if (only) one of the arguments is not adequately defended. In a subordinate structure, in contrast, subordinate arguments depend on the acceptability of higher arguments in the structure. If one of the latter is shown to be unacceptable (say 1.1), then a consideration of all lower arguments (1.1.1, 1.1.1.1, etc.) is unnecessary. Students are therefore taught to distinguish the different kinds of argumentation structures and to take the corresponding obligations of the protagonist into account while considering (anticipated) criticism from the antagonist (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Snoeck Henkemans 2002, 66).

Recognizing Implicit Elements in Argument

In preparing to evaluate argumentation, one must identify implicit elements in the argumentation to which the arguer is committed. Implicit premises are claims that support a standpoint without being put into words. Though they are not explicitly expressed, they still function as part of the attempt to convince others of the standpoint (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Snoeck Henkemans 2002, 49).

Put simply, an implicit premise is a bridging device between an argument and the standpoint that is being defended. An example is the implicit premise 1.2 (below), which can be reconstructed as the step necessary to go from argument 1.1 to standpoint 1:

1. John Irving's newest book isn't much.

1.1. It is not about real life.

1.2. (Good books are about real life.)

Why would 1.1 be relevant for standpoint 1 and a possible argument for this standpoint? 1.2 provides the answer. It is easiest to start with the so-called "logical minimum," which can be summarized as "if argument, then standpoint." In our example, the logical minimum is "If John Irving's newest book is not about real life, it isn't much." This addition makes the reasoning valid, but it seems that the arguer is committed to more, and may be taken to mean, more generally, that books are not very interesting if they are not about real life.

Making clear what is logically necessary is only one analytic step. The reconstructed implicit premise should, where possible, be more informative than the logical minimum. Sometimes a generalization is clearly implied. In other cases, the logical minimum has to be made more specific. Taking this next step is an instance of functionalization, which treats the implicit premise as a form of indirect language use which can be understood in terms of Gricean maxims and the Searlean analysis of indirect speech acts (which provide a theoretical motivation for reconstruction).

Usually the missing premise can be seen as a general rule or a rule-like statement on which the argument is based. Such rules rely on abstract pragmatic principles, which are called "argument schemes" in the theory of argumentation (van Eemeren et al. 1996, 19). In a critical exchange in which a certain argument scheme is used, critical questions that pertain to the specific relation between the argument and the standpoint become relevant. The dialectification of the argument schemes pairs particular schemes with matching "critical questions." Because these questions direct criticism, the choice of an argument scheme is decisive in determining the dialectical route the interaction takes (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, 94).

The following example illustrates argumentation based on a "symptomatic" relation:

1. That restaurant is very expensive. [because]

   1.1. It has three Michelin stars. [and]

   1.2. (It is symptomatic for three-star restaurants to be very expensive.)

A real-life example taken from a Dutch newspaper is Janet Jackson's argumentation for the claim that her brother Michael cannot be guilty of sexually abusing minors: "His dedication to all kinds of child welfare organizations already shows that Michael can't be guilty" Apparently, Janet Jackson thinks that people who do charity work for children's organizations cannot prey on children.

Several critical questions are pertinent here. Does a dedication to welfare organizations show the claimed innocence? (Especially as some readers of the paper thought that this dedication *supported* the suggestion that Michael Jackson was guilty.) Does someone who acts admirably in one area always act appropriately in others? These are the kinds of questions to be asked when an arguer uses the argument scheme based on a symptomatic relation. Other sorts of critical questions are to be asked for other types of argument schemes. In teaching students to become better arguers, we show them how to identify the various types of schemes and how to ask and answer the critical questions associated with each scheme.

Evaluating the Argumentation

Once a full analytic overview of an argumentative discourse has been completed, the discourse can be evaluated. A pragma-dialectical evaluation aims to determine to what extent the various speech acts performed in the discourse can be instrumental in resolving a difference of opinion.

To ensure that a dispute can be brought to a solution, the parties involved must subscribe to certain basic principles for a constructive exchange of opinions. These "rules for critical discussion" are such that everyone who makes an attempt to

convince others by means of argumentative discourse can be held accountable to the rules. A violation of one of the rules impedes the resolution of a dispute and is regarded as a fallacy — an obstruction to an adequate resolution of the dispute (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, 162). Because each of the rules plays an essential role in the dialectical process of testing the acceptability of a standpoint against criticism, all of them are the result of dialectification. The following provides a brief overview of the ten discussion rules (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, 190-5).

1. *The freedom rule*: Discussants may not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or from calling standpoints into question.
2. *The burden of proof rule*: Discussants who advance a standpoint may not refuse to defend this standpoint when requested to do so.
3. *The standpoint rule*: Attacks on standpoints may not bear on a standpoint that has not actually been put forward by the other party.
4. *The relevance rule*: Standpoints may not be defended by non-argumentation or argumentation that is not relevant to the standpoint.
5. *The unexpressed premise rule*: Discussants may not falsely attribute unexpressed premises to the other party or disown responsibility for their own implicit premises.
6. *The starting-point rule*: Discussants may not falsely present something as an accepted starting point or falsely deny that something is an accepted starting point.
7. *The validity rule*: Reasoning that in an argumentation is presented as formally conclusive may not be invalid in a logical sense.
8. *The argument scheme rule*: Standpoints may not be regarded as conclusively defended by argumentation that is not presented as based on formally conclusive reasoning if the

defence does not take place by means of appropriate argument schemes that are applied correctly.

9. *The concluding rule*: Inconclusive defences of standpoints may not lead to maintaining these standpoints, and conclusive defences of standpoints may not lead to maintaining expressions of doubt concerning these standpoints.
10. *The usage rule*: Discussants may not use any formulations that are insufficiently clear or confusingly ambiguous, and they may not deliberately misinterpret the other party's formulations.

These rules ensure productive critical discussions in a variety of ways. The freedom rule is designed to ensure that standpoints and doubt regarding standpoints may be freely advanced. The burden of proof rule is intended to ensure that advanced and doubted standpoints are defended against critical attacks (because a difference of opinion cannot be resolved if a party who advances a standpoint is not prepared to take on the role of protagonist). The standpoint rule does not allow a participant in a critical discussion to distort his or her opponent's standpoint or impute a fictitious standpoint to the other party (doing so is known as the "straw man" fallacy). And so on.

The rules of critical discussion can be violated in a variety of ways. The freedom rule, for example, can be violated by declaring a standpoint sacrosanct, by threatening an opponent ("It is up to you to have that opinion but there comes a time when I can't control my temper anymore"), or by attacking an opponent personally. One way to violate the burden of proof rule is by shifting the burden of proof ("War is under all circumstances wrong, you can prove me wrong"); another is by expressing the standpoint in such a way that it looks as if it does not require any defence, because it should be considered an established fact ("Everybody knows that taking vitamins can be very bad for your health"). The concluding rule can be violated — in the concluding stage — by the protagonist's concluding that a standpoint is

absolutely true merely because it has been successfully defended, or by the antagonist's concluding from the fact that it has not been proved that something is the case, that it is not the case (*argumentum ad ignorantiam*). For example, "Now that we see that it cannot be proved that Ecstasy is harmful, we can conclude that it is absolutely harmless."

The rules of critical discussion are not algorithmic, but heuristic. They are not rules that automatically lead to a specific series of instructions that guarantee the desired result. Argumentation is, in the pragma-dialectical view, not a mechanical process, but a social activity aimed at convincing others of the acceptability of a standpoint by removing the other party's doubt. Together with the analytic overview, the rules of critical discussion facilitate a critical reflection on argumentative discourse. Though they do not, by themselves, guarantee that a resolution will be reached, they provide valuable assistance in the evaluation of argumentation. By adhering to the rules, arguers will run little risk of fallaciousness.

It is not, of course, sufficient for students to learn the rules of critical discussion by heart. They must be able to apply them successfully in practice. What is essential is that they understand how the principle of dialectification is put to good use in the rules for conducting a critical discussion. We believe that the ability to explain how each of the rules is necessary to foster this critical process is more important than the ability to sum up the traditional fallacies.

Testing the Pragma-Dialectical Skills

What do we expect from students who take a critical thinking course? What exactly should they be able to do? First and foremost, they should be able to analyze and to evaluate argumentative discourse. That means that they need to know how to make, well-considered decisions in constructing an analytic overview and in evaluating argumentative discourse in terms of the ideal model of critical discussion. In addition, they should be able to produce clear and dialectically acceptable argumentative

texts and to engage in discussions and debates in a critical and reasonable manner.

We test our students' insights and their ability to analyze, judge, and participate in critical discussion in a number of ways. For practical reasons, the analysis and evaluation tests are generally integrated in one comprehensive test paper. Students are asked to create an analytic overview of a text and provide a critical commentary. In putting together their analysis, students have to give a full and systematic overview of a written piece of argumentation: an argumentative essay, a newspaper column, or a letter to the editor. Students are not given free rein in their analysis, but are expected to respond in a manner that illustrates their ability to complete a variety of tasks, all of which have been practised intensively in the program.[1]

First, the students must describe the dialectical point of departure. What exactly is the bone of contention in this case? Who are the parties in the dispute and what are their positions? Which discussion roles are taken on by the different participants? In making an adequate analysis of the dispute as a whole, students may be expected to disentangle a mixed dispute as a complex made up of two or more single disputes. The ability to do so is vital when they are involved in dialectical analysis.

Second, students must indicate how the four dialectical stages are represented in the text in question. Lines in the text are numbered, to allow them to indicate relevant lines readily and precisely. In doing so, they are expected to explain which indicators and linguistic cues the text and the context provide for determining the various stages.

Third, students must reconstruct the argumentation structure of the text. In explaining arguments and their relationship to each other, the students must explain the precise reasoning behind their analyses, and justify the choices that have been made in the analyses. In particular, they are to indicate the dialectical clues in the argumentation and its presentation that they have taken into account.

After analyzing the argumentation structure of the discourse, the students have to reconstruct unexpressed premises in the

arguments. In each case, they are expected to begin with the associated conditional ("the logical minimum") and make that statement as informative as the context allows.

Fifth (and last in constructing an analytic overview), the students are expected to identify all the argument schemes that are used in each component of the argumentation. After students complete an analytic overview, they are expected to demonstrate their evaluative skills by assessing the discourse they have analyzed. Because pragma-dialectics teaches students an ideal model of a critical discussion, the main question here can be summarized as "How far is the text as it has been reconstructed in the analysis removed from the critical ideal?" The questions that need to be answered in this endeavour can, in turn, be summarized as "Are there any inconsistencies or violations of rules for critical discussion in the text?" and "If so, what are their consequences for the resolution of (or the failure to resolve) the dispute?" The tasks covered in the standard pragma-dialectical test we have just described are summarized in the standard pragma-dialectical test described below.

The standard pragma-dialectical test

A. *Making the analytic overview*

1. Describe the dialectical point of departure: the bone of contention in the text, the parties involved and their role in the discussion (protagonist/ antagonist).
2. Typify the explicit or implicit dispute: non-mixed/ mixed, single/ multiple, combination.
3. Identify the way in which the dialectical stages are represented in the text: confrontation/ opening/ argumentation/ conclusion.
4. Reconstruct the argumentation structure: single/ multiple/ coordinative/ subordinative/ combination.
5. Make the unexpressed premises explicit.

6. Identify the argument schemes that are used in the argumentation: causal/ symptomatic/ comparison.

B. *Evaluating the argumentation*

1. Identify the logical and pragmatic inconsistencies in the text.
2. Determine whether the arguments put forward belong to the set of acceptable common starting points.
3. Ask the relevant critical questions pertaining to the argument schemes that are used and check whether the arguments adequately support the (sub)standpoints.
4. Identify violations of the rules for critical discussion and characterize the fallacies that have been committed.
5. Give an overall assessment of the argumentative text and explain the extent to which the difference of opinion has been resolved.

Making an analytic overview and evaluating the argumentation on the basis of the rules for critical discussion are excellent preparation for the attempt to teach students how to improve their oral and written argumentative discourse. After students have learned how to produce the overview, the finer points of constructing an argumentative essay can be taught and, along with them, the most advantageous way to present their arguments. At this stage, we focus on questions such as the following: Where can I best put my standpoint — at the very beginning of the text, at the end, or somewhere else? How can I best present my argument? What is the best order in which to present the arguments that back up my standpoint? Which of my premises need to be explicit and which should remain implicit? These questions also provide the general guidelines we use in assessing the students' written performances.

Finally, students can be tested on their performances in oral classroom debate. In this case, we expect them to demonstrate that they are able to engage in a verbal discussion without violating

the discussion rules. In the process of doing so, they are expected to identify the rule violations of others in a dialogue, and to react to these violations in an appropriate way. The main goal of these verbal assignments is to test the students' inclination and capability to engage in critical discussion in a reasonable way.[2] The rules for critical discussion that are solicited by the test questions are, in fact, the same criteria that are used to judge the students' performances. In this way, the learning outcomes of the pragma-dialectics program is amenable to testing, in particular non-standardized testing.

Conclusion

Our commitment to the pragma-dialectical theoretical framework leaves room for different types of educational programs with varying degrees of intellectual sophistication. Our teaching and testing methods have been used successfully in many different kinds of educational contexts in the Netherlands and other countries, including the use of the method in high school classes and university-level academic argumentation courses, and in general composition programs for non-experts as well as specific courses for lawyers and other professionals. All of these courses vary in scope and difficulty according to the level, needs, and wishes of the students. What remains constant is the educational focus on making well-reasoned decisions in analyzing and evaluating argumentative discourse, and in producing argumentative texts. Because such decisions are central to critical thinking, its teaching and testing can be based on a critical reflection on argumentative discourse that is grounded in pragma-dialectical theory.

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Notes

1. This style of analysis shares similarities in format to *The Ennis-Weir Critical Thinking Essay Test* (particularly the kinds of skills it attempts to measure) and with the style of learning and testing that Baker University's General Education program promotes (see both Hatcher and Johnson, this volume).
2. When we say "capability to engage in critical discussion in a *reasonable* way," here, we refer specifically to our aim to measure inclinations. This aim is quite similar to the kind discussed by Giancarlo-Gittens (this volume), with the exceptions that in her test description she refers to inclinations as "dispositions," and that we test these dispositions in a non-standardized format.