Logic and Writing
Ron Singer

1. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Goals:

This course teaches a method of verbal reasoning using a dozen questions drawn from formal logic. Examples are: "Are the causal assumptions adequately supported?" and "How much is the writer's argument based on *ad hominem* and other emotional appeals?" The principal aim of the course is to strengthen thinking, reading and writing about social and political issues. Secondary aims are to increase the students' store of general information and to equip them with tools for effective citizenship.

History and Range:

I first taught a version of Logic and Writing in a Freshman English class for adults at Rutgers University. I then taught the course for about twenty-five years as a senior English elective at Friends Seminary, where I also did a "pilot" with ninth-graders. In recent years, the class has been taught to students of diverse ethnicity, race and class at Street Squash in Harlem (seniors and returning first-year college students) and at George Jackson Academy (rising seventh graders). I have found that the model can be adapted for students of different ages by choosing more or less complex topics and by presenting the taxonomy (the logical questions) in different ways. In 2013 and 2014, a L & W workshop was presented at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Examples of Topics (arranged in approximate order of ascending complexity)

1. Should we enact laws banning the sale of big sodas? (the Bloomberg campaign)

2. Are single-gender schools superior to mixed-gender ones? (studies in the U.S. and New Zealand)

3. How much blame do bystanders deserve when they fail to come to the aid of people in danger? (the Kitty Genovese case)

4. Do "soft" prisons and community hostility toward the police contribute to high crime rates? (*Wall Street Journal* editorial)

5. To what extent do biological factors account for altruism? (Desmond Morris)

6. How sound is the argument by eco-doomsayers that population patterns should prompt rich countries to withhold food aid from poor ones? (Garrett Hardin)

The Instructor:

Ron Singer, B.A., English (Union College, 1962); M.A., Ph.D. English (University of Chicago (1968, 1976).

Beginning as a Peace Corps volunteer in Nigeria, Ron Singer taught English for 44 years (1964-2008) to middle school, upper-school, and two-and-four year college students of various ages. The bulk of his teaching career (1976-2008) was at Friends Seminary, where he also served for five years as Department Chair. In 1999, he spent a month on the Navajo reservation as a consultant at *Dine'* College, a two year-school in Tsaile, Arizona. For about fifteen years, Singer has been a coach and writing teacher/tutor at Street Squash, an after-school program in Harlem. During July 2013 and 2014, he taught Logic and Writing at George Jackson Academy.

Among Singer's teaching-related awards and fellowships are recognition from the New York City Board of Education (for teaching Linguistics in secondary school); a grant from Friends Seminary (for fostering diversity in the school community and in the English curriculum); and a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (for compiling an annotated bibliography of the literature of frontiers in South Africa, Australia, and the U.S.)

In addition to many literature courses and such specialty courses as the Bible and Linguistics, the focus of Singer's teaching has always been writing, both creative and expository. Currently a full-time practicing writer, he has published hundreds of essays, stories, and poems in newspapers, journals and e-zines.

2. A SUMMARY-EVALUATION OF THE COURSE AS TAUGHT TO RISING SEVENTH-GRADERS IN A FOUR-WEEK FORMAT AT GEORGE JACKSON ACADEMY, IN NEW YORK CITY

We began with a number of topics that we hoped would appeal to the students:

1. If you see a person in trouble, are you obligated to help?

2. Does playing violent video games cause violent behavior?

3. Do boys and girls get a better education in single sex schools?

4. Should 'big sodas' be banned?

Two/three articles relating to each topic were used to examine the issues. While reading the articles, students considered the following questions:

1. What **question** does the speaker/writer ask?

2. What is the speaker's/writer's **answer**?

3. What are the speaker's/writer's **supporting points**?

4. What **descriptive, definitional and causal assumptions** does the writer/ speaker make?

5. What are the **value conflicts** raised by the speaker/writer, and what is the speaker writer's **preferred value**?

6. (where applicable) How sound are the **statistical points**?

7. What **other errors of logic** does the writer/speaker make (e.g. **either-or thinking, ad hominem arguments**)?

8. What **alternative conclusions** can be drawn from the writer's strong points?

As the course progressed students chose a single topic to research in more detail. We honed in on the key ideas as we gauged the students' understanding: Ultimately the students wrote their own short essay that debated the issue using the evidence from their reading and class work.

The main activities that pupils engaged in beyond reading and writing were: informal class discussions, formal debates, drama skits and independent Internet research in small groups.

An end-of-course student questionnaire showed that while the formal debate and the drama skits were the most enjoyable activities, pupils recognized that the most useful activities were the class discussions and writing exercises. Perhaps somewhat predictably, the most popular topic was the issue of violent video games. However, most students were very positive about all four topics.

Four improvements that students suggested for the course were:

- More word processing

- More structure for skits

- Examine one topic per week in depth rather than an overview of the four followed by a deeper look at a single chosen one.
-
- More of the 'fun' activities

Other topics that pupils suggested that they would be interested in:

- Gun ownership/control
- Faith-based schools
- War
- Racism and immigration
- Junk food