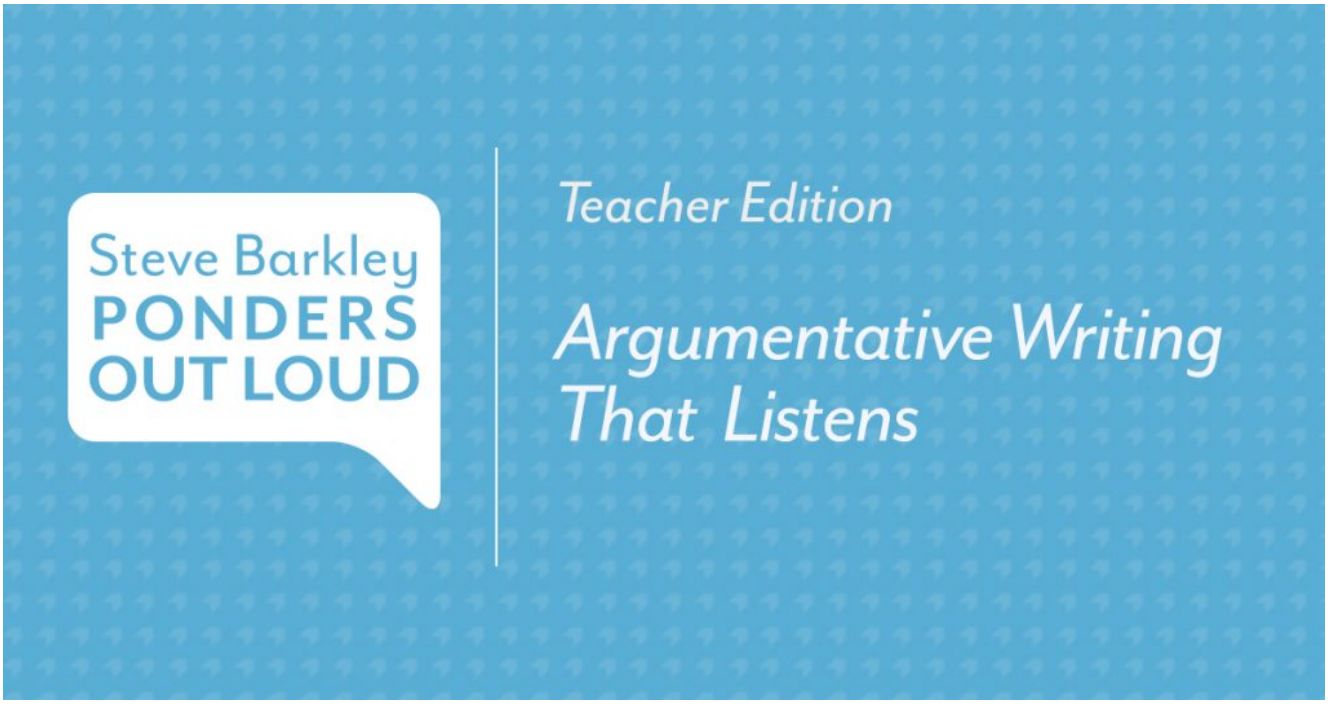
Podcast for Teachers: Argumentative Writing That Listens



We can teach students to write and debate with nuance and empathy to achieve productive civil discourse. An important topic when the media around them shares few examples. Erica Beaton, an experienced English and Social Studies teacher, shares the highlights of her findings as she implemented a listening process into students' argumentative essay assignments. Strategies for scaffolding students initial work are included.

Find Erica's article, "How to Heal a Divided World: Argumentative Writing that Actually Listens to the Other Side," here.
Visit The Good Enough Teacher website here.

Find Erica on Twitter: @EricaLeeBeaton

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PODCAST TRANSCRIPTSteve [Intro]: 00:00 Hello, and welcome to the teacher edition of the Steve Barkley Ponders Out loud podcast. The complexity of teaching is both challenging and rewarding. And my curiosity is peaked whenever I explore with teachers the multiple pathways for facilitating student engagement in the exciting world of learning. This podcast looks to serve teachers as they motivate coach and support their learners.

Steve: 00:31 Argumentative writing that listens. Joining our podcast today is Erica Beaton. I invited Erica to join the podcast after reading an article that she had posted titled, "How to Heal a Divided World: Argumentative Writing That Actually Listens to The Other Side." Erica's writing caught my attention because I'd been reading "Think Again" by by Adam Grant, and he has a section in there that looks at the the problem that we have when people form opinions on two sides and we can't get either side to listen to the other side. And so Erica's article just kind of hit at exactly the time I had laid that piece down. So I contacted her and asked her to join us. And she said, yes. So Erica, welcome.

Erica: 01:37 Thank you, Steve. It's nice to be here.

Steve: 01:39 I'm wondering if you'd start by giving folks a little bit of background on yourself first and then maybe what caused this topic to become important for you?

Erica: 01:50 So I'm Erica Beaton and I spent the last 15 years teaching English and history at a high school in west Michigan. And there, I had the opportunity to do a lot of work with the national writing project and teachers that were really experimenting and kind of pushing themselves outside of just their classroom experiments and research projects. And so, I was invited based on the work I did in the classroom, and then teaching and consulting that I do online and outside of that, to be a part of a national writing project research

program that was researching this idea of listening arguments. And so, it was led by Michigan state professor Dr. Jen Van Der Heide and Montana state professor Dr. Alison Wynhoff Olsen, and they brought together national writing project teachers and after seeing so many things happening over the last number of years with concerns over increasingly polarized debates and just unhealthy civil discourse that they were seeing, whether it was online in YouTube comments sections or in our houses of government.

Erica: 03:17 And so seeing, well, what can we do in terms of teaching students, how to actually listen to the other side, instead of typical argumentative writing that they do, where it's shoot down the other side so that my argument wins, even if I totally ignore what the points are of the other side. And so, that's where we really began looking into and struggling to find models and examples of that – that healthy and empathetic out there in the world. And we found results that were powerful for students and just amazing for us to see the results that straight up resulted from that.

Steve: 03:58 When you first introduced us to your students, does the craziness of what's going on in social media and on TV, kind of like jump out at them after you raise the issue?

Erica: 04:11 It hadn't even jumped out to them because I didn't need to raise the issue. The issue was already so big. You know, as I said, I taught English and history. I was really fortunate to teach a two hour block of the course together. And so we were able to really talk about how systems worked in kind of the larger sphere looking at humanities and kind of the application of history today. So it was constantly on their minds and on their mouths. Not always necessarily in their ears though, listening to one another.

Steve: 04:47 So how do you introduce the students to the term, "listening argument?"

Erica: 04:53 So when I first did it, I was in the dark forest trying to figure out what this was. We knew that it was a concept that could be there. So my first go through was really the experiments of action research. And so, where it began for us was this idea of bringing two people together. So showing them that most of the time when they're commenting on social media, it's not even a person on the other side of the screen, whoever they're trolling, if I can say for, more authentic adolescent voices. But that idea that they don't even see another person. So once we're able to create this idea of creating an listening argument, but seeing another person and who that person is, we can begin to build empathy for another side. And so, the other side was no longer just the enemy, but somebody with background, somebody with experiences and values and motivations and fears, and that's really where it began, is crafting who those other people were.

Steve: 06:07 So the listening focuses an understanding of the opposing view?

Erica: 06:16 Mhm. And understanding that they come to that argument ground with experiences that are valid for them and important for them. They
don't necessarily have to match between the two sides, but they still hold them with great importance and it's unpacking why that's so important for them.

Steve: 06:39 How do you how do you introduce your students to this idea of a listening argument?

Erica: 06:49 One of the places that we struggled as researchers was finding mentor text examples that listen with great empathy and nuance
because most of the time people are writing in their own echo chambers. And so what we found through lucky YouTube wandering was a YouTube channel by Jubilee called middle ground, where that's exactly what they do. They physically bring in people with opposing points of view and have them sit together and

talk through their issues. And so the channel itself does a really nice job of showing physically these two sides, very diametrically opposed. So it could be I just saw one recently that was scientists versus flat earthers and bringing those people together. And so, what was amazing was watching this with my students as we were building the background of, well, what does this side value? What does this side fear and how are their motivations bringing together their responses? To see these people who are very different, very different views, staying calm, not getting up and storming and leaving the table.

Erica: 08:08 That happens a lot of times at family dinners that turn political. And they weren't using profanity, they weren't doing any of the typical moves, using angry emojis, if you will, in real life that we normally see in civil discourse today. And we were able to look at well, what do they do ahead of time to build this understanding that we're going to listen to each other? That's what's important here in finding this middle ground. And so with my students, we watched examples of these together and students took notes on what were they experiencing? What did they value? And then as they moved off to write their own social justice papers, social issues papers, they found different videos that were similar to their own because there's tons on this channel, to start to build an understanding and see that person that is on the other side of their debate and sort of understand, well, what are they coming to this middle ground with? And if I can come and they can both come, we can sit together. How can we then move forward?

Steve: 09:19 I am so excited about this possibility and hoping that this podcast gets gets more people exploring it. How do you get students to look at the at the research and data and evidence with different perspectives, was one of the pieces that jumped out when I read Adam Grant's work and he gave an example where two different newspapers had described a article

of scientific research. And once said coffee's no good for you and the other one said coffee can be good for you and that all people read was the headlines and walked away. How do you create a headline that causes you to go read the article because you really need all the information, not just a piece. And I know a tendency is I'm looking for research article to back up my argument, I'm gonna pull two lines out of it. How do you take this to kids?

Erica: 10:23 Yeah, because I mean, anyone that's taught research for half an hour knows that the move students makes is grab a quote and drop it in. We jokingly call it quote, bombing, where they just leave the scene where they don't even explain it. And, and so what happens is they're just grabbing these random books that don't move their argument in a direction, or don't even respond to the other side. So what happened was I crafted a document that has physically, two heads drawn on it so that my students could really start to humanize the other side. And so then what they did was, as they were reading a piece of research, they had to think about it from their own side. So using the head, we've called it "reader x" and answer rhetorical questions, questions that used ethos, pathos, logos, to think about the communicator and why should my side trust this author?

Erica: 11:23 Why should my side trust this source? But they also had to go through these questions with the head from the other side. So someone that sits on the other side of the table, well, what if they read this article, this topic, what would they be afraid of? What would they be motivated by with this article? What would be convincing or worthwhile to them in reading this article? And I'll tell you, my students had a really easy time answering it for their own side, because they could find articles that spoke to what they wanted. But when they got to the other side, they struggled because they said, nobody's talking to the other side. Exactly, you're right. And we had one example, a student – really sweet kid. He, on the

first day, he knew he was writing a pro-life paper. And he said, this is what it's going to be, puts his headphones on and he gets to work.

Erica: 12:22 But after about two weeks into the unit, he came in one day and he said, Mrs. Beaton, I have to start over. I need to change my whole paper. And, you know, put the breaks on – oh my gosh, we're two weeks into the paper, how can we start over and I talk to me about this now, what's going on? He said, well, I was looking into it last night and my paper is a pro-life paper, but I wanted to see what the government does to support mothers who are experiencing unexpected pregnancies and I couldn't find anything or I couldn't really even find very much. So I think I have to change my whole paper instead of saying no abortions, I think it should be the government should help mothers experiencing unwanted pregnancies. Can I change my whole paper? My fellow researcher and I, we looked across the room at each other with these big eyes to say, my gosh, this child, he doesn't even see the maturity – he has leaped over generations of Americans who are also trying to work through this really heavy heart issue. He thought he was changing his topic, but he was really just listening to what the other side wanted and needed and feared and all these elements. And he said, oh, it's this nuance space I have to go to in the middle instead of abandoning everything altogether. It's finding adjustments by listening with empathy. It was amazing.

Steve: 14:00 Well, there were a great number of strategies listed in your article to assist teachers in building the the scaffolding for kids into this process so we'll be sure to put the link to your article in and and people can also find that on your website. Am I correct?

Erica: 14:30 That's correct.

Steve: 14:30 Do you want to tell them what that is?

Erica: 14:33 The website is www.ericaleebeaton.com. And on all the socials, I'm thegoodenoughteacher. So they can find me that way too.

Steve: 14:48 Well, before I let you go, I'm wondering about people who teach younger students who were listening in to this and got excited about it. You have any thoughts for how this kind of argumentative listening could be could be built in for some maybe middle school and upper elementary school students?

Erica: 15:20 Yeah, absolutely. The students that I was working with that particular year were a group of 10th graders that would, if you were using the terms, they would be at risk or lower than grade level in terms of literacy and reading and writing. And so, we know that along with all students, upper L, middle, even advanced students, giving them scaffolds to work with. So whether it's a framework for writing or sentence starters, I did both with those students and found great success with that. So I know that lower grade levels would also find that. So looking at giving them sentence starters. For example, something like, "many advocates of Y value this, but they don't realize this." And so, using that language was able to show in a piece of writing, yes, I understand, I see what you value. I'm going to present another element of that, that maybe you haven't considered. And so that gave the students space sort of the whole hands with both sides and say, I hear you, I'm going to carry the weight of what you have on your heart. At the same time, I have something important that I want to show you. And so it's not just turning your back and doing some angry move, but saying, I'm going to come together and join you on this.

Steve: 16:51 What I'm hearing is that I didn't catch the full value of reading, but now that I'm listening to you, I'm catching the power of the motivation and the engagement that occurs from taking students to a deeper level of thinking that I don't think we get to enough.

Erica: 17:13 Yeah. And that's what was so powerful to see in these students. I had one girl that was writing about conversion therapy that parents might elect to have for LGBT children. And she was very angry coming from a place of personal experience and to see her go from a place where her original ideas were full of a colorful word choice, to a place where she could talk about the love that parents have for their children, the love that all parents have for their children. And to see if some parents don't have as much information, they might make a choice towards conversion therapy. And to see her move in that space to say, these parents are all acting out of love, and maybe they just need more information. It was, I mean, just so much maturity and just beautiful to see that growth.

Steve: 18:17 Well Erica, I have to tell you, I'm really glad that I stopped at the end of your article and dropped you a note and that you joined us here. Again, I'll make sure that the links to to your website are are posted in the lead-in. Why don't you go ahead and give that to people one more time.

Erica: 18:40 The website is ericaleebeaton.com.

Steve: 18:44 I love it. Well, thanks so much for joining us today.

Erica: 18:47 Appreciate it. My pleasure.

Steve: 18:49 Bye-Bye

Steve [Outro]: 18:51 Thanks for listening in folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter @stevebarkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.