Findings from the SAGES Portfolio Committee, Summer 2009

Background: In June 2009, the SAGES Portfolio Faculty Evaluation Committee, consisting of university faculty from Chemical Engineering, History, English, SAGES, and Accounting, read and evaluated 423 student writing portfolios submitted to the SAGES office between May 2008 and May 2009. Previous faculty evaluation procedures during the SAGES pilot and first years of implementation (2002-2008) focused solely on assessing individual portfolios in order to provide feedback to students submitting them as a graduation requirement. These evaluation procedures were revised in January 2009 due to inconsistent evaluation, lack of systematic program assessment, and cost.

Results: “Our chief finding is that students are producing an overall good quality of writing in the SAGES program, but would benefit from more instruction in argumentation.” Note: The full report is available at www.case.edu/writing (under “News”)

For the purposes of group reading, the committee generally defined argument as the presence of a thesis and sustained treatment of its claims. Readers paid particular attention to two questions: #1. Are these research papers arguing a strong position and to what extent are they successful? #2. Are they aware of themselves as argument papers? (Even though they may not be successful for various reasons -- lack of thesis, weak thesis, lack of adequate evidence, failure to acknowledge contrasting viewpoints -- did they gesture toward convincing an audience of a point?)

Conclusions: Most Case students were writing arguments in the “broad sense,” as opposed to engaging in “academic argument.” (A small percentage, however, engaged in little to no argumentation instead submitting various “reports”)

Argument in the broad sense: informing readers about a certain problem and that it exists
*thesis is not arguable or debatable
*no acknowledgment of conflicting view
*purpose is to explain or present one’s position, which is assumed to be correct. Intent is not to persuade (little to no audience awareness).

Sample: “What does forensic toxicology really involve when it is compared to the TV images that so many people believe are the truth? As I examined one randomly picked episode from some popular forensic shows, I started to notice the difference between reality and television.”

Academic argument: getting readers to know that certain perspectives on a problem carry more weight than others
*thesis is issue-centered, arguable, debatable
*anticipate and acknowledge conflicting view(s) (thesis often contains qualification)
*purpose is to convince readers to agree with one’s position

Sample: “Progress in schools is difficult to measure . . . . Despite the obvious difficulties that arise while trying to measure progress in schools, our government has oversimplified the matter and determined that the sole instrument for this measurement should be standardized testing. What current legislators have failed to grasp, however is that students possess a range of abilities; therefore, requiring each one to pass the same test is unfair.”
Teaching Argument in SAGES
"White Paper" Focus Group
January 21, 2010

Name: _____________________

Session #1 Workshop Questions

Take a few minutes to answer each question. Then, in small groups or with a partner, share your responses. Please remember to turn in your sheet before you leave!

1. How do you/your co-instructors define argument in the context of SAGES writing?

2. Is it difficult for your students to generate an academic argument? Why?
3. What strategies have you tried (or would you like to try) to teach academic argument in the context of SAGES?

4. What’s the best strategy you’ve used for teaching argument in SAGES? How would you categorize it (writing thesis statements; conceptualizing argument; using sources to support your position; etc.)

5. Other Comments?