ECER 2010

Pre-Conference 23–24 August
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Affiliations: UCC - Danish National Centre for Inclusive Practice, Denmark

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22. Research in Higher Education

Format of Presentation: Paper

Alternative EEERA Network: 9. Student Assessment

Topics: NW 22: Teaching, learning and assessment in higher education

Keywords: Argumentation; Higher Education; Students’ assessment

Do We Need Argumentative Reasoning in Higher Education?

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Presenting Author: Trindade, Rui

The Bologna Reform of the European Universities brings the development of student skills to the frontline of teachers’ concerns. Acknowledging that the simple transfer of information must be replaced by teaching methods centred on student learning activities is now a reality, and has challenged traditional higher-education pedagogies focused on “right answers”. In a broader perspective, the teaching paradigm and the learning outcomes are changing, namely those which are connected to communication and argumentative skills.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to questioning the role of argumentation in higher education, in order to understand how the work of students incorporates the development of argumentative skills, in line with quality improvement demands in higher education. Assessment instruments related to the development of argumentative skills are identified and analysed in two Portuguese Schools (Education Sciences and Engineering, both from the University of Porto).

The specific objectives of this research are: 1) To evaluate the real importance of argumentative skills as a criterion for assessing students; 2) to analyse argumentative reasoning structures that are present in reports and other deliverables resulting from students’ assignments; and 3) to analyze argument pragmatics used by students.

Argumentation is structured upon contextualized and communicative reasoning, rather than text (and logic reasoning) based on assumptions that are not discussed. Argumentative reasoning fits well in the field of possible, preferred choice, for which the best arguments have to be produced (Grácio, 1992; 1998; Toulmin 2001). All situations characterised by more proficient levels in the production and use of knowledge, as academic learning, assume the existence of choices that require reasoning and argumentative text. Furthermore, argumentation alternatives are essential for knowledge meaningful appropriation (Weston, 2005).

Argumentative reasoning is part of the soft skills that must be developed by higher-education students, since they are asked to support conclusions of experimental procedures, to arguably choose one theoretical option or technique among others, and to organize projects whose action lines must be sustained (Coffin, 2008).

The place for argumentation in higher education curricula differs from one country to another, and teaching traditions differ among Latin and Anglo-Saxon communities. Argumentation is usually seen as less important than the acquisition of knowledge and learning contents (Andrews, 2009), and rhetoric has long been misunderstood / mistreated (Perelman, 1997; Amossy, 2009). However, the changing relationship between higher education and society, both in the social implications of knowledge and in the structure of the knowledge society, enabled argumentation to emerge as a need to achieve equity, citizenship and social justice in contemporary higher education (Brennan, 2007). In addition, higher education policy literature has tended to follow the human capital development, and subsequently to promote civic values and behaviour, facilitating social mobility (id; ibidem). To achieve this purpose of ensuring equity it is important to develop argumentative skills among students.

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used

To reach the objective referred above, the results of students’ assignments from first cycle degrees (Post Bologna reform) were analysed with a content-analysis methodology. The Curricular Units that we selected to monitor were those that included argumentative reasoning as one of the target skills that should be developed by the students.

Further decisions related to assessment instruments were taken by analysing each course description. Data collection resulted from assignments, and included essays, participation in on-line forums, and term papers. Our analysis highlighted issues such as argumentative text elements, argumentative reasoning and pragmatic relevance, to characterize the importance of argumentation in higher education.

Research ethics were at the top line of our concerns, namely personal data protection, and all references to teachers and courses were removed from the public documents.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

Since this research project examines works produced by students, in search of evidence of argumentative skills, we expect to improve our knowledge about:

a) The current importance and practices of argumentation processes for assessing students in Higher Education.

b) Forms of reasoning used by students in their learning process.

c) Higher education assessment processes analysed in terms of communication pragmatics.

We also expect it to contribute to the debate on ways and means of assessment used in higher education.

References


Routledge.


**Intent of Publication**

We intend to submit this paper to the European Educational Research Journal or to the Journal of Higher Education.
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1406 University Students' Experiences of Guidance in Finland: Multifaceted Challenges
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Affiliations: Finnish Institute for Educational Research, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

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