ACE
ARGUMENT-CENTERED EDUCATION

Professional Reading Group
Study Guide

This study guide supports a professional reading group's study and discussion of *The Most Reasonable Answer: Helping Students Build Better Arguments Together* (Harvard Education Press, 2018), by Alina Reznitskaya and Ian Wilkinson.

Foreword

Catherine Snow, professor of education at Harvard University, writes in the Foreword that "debate . . . is distinct from inquiry dialogue in that the discussion topic is formulated as opposing positions, and in that the goal of the participants is to defend their chosen (or assigned) position as effectively as possible. One motivation for engaging in debate is to win. In other words, debate is inherently competitive, whereas inquiry dialogue is inherently collaborative."

> Catherine Snow posits, rather than proves, that inquiry dialogue is collaborative. Two questions. Is it possible, do you think, to have a classroom discussion or seminar in which students are "inherently collaborative" with each other and not interested in defending their own point of view? And, if this is possible, is there a possible enervation of student motivation if there is zero ego-involvement?

Snow goes on to write that both debate and inquiry dialogue have important cognitive benefits for students. "Are there reasons to prefer inquiry dialogue to debate or other specific forms of classroom discussion? No one has carried out a rigorous comparison, but the available evidence suggests that any format that enables students to express their own views in carefully thought through forms of language with specific goals and the chance to think deeply about appealing topics, will improve student outcomes. Such opportunities are vanishingly rare in most

classrooms, so adding even a brief session of inquiry dialogue or debate just a few times a week to any student's schedule would constitute a significant enhancement. . . . A key characteristic of all the various forms of classroom talk . . . is distributed cognition. Only if students can talk with one another can they learn from one another, can their own understandings of events and phenomena be enriched by access to others' understandings."

> What do you think about "distributed cognition" as a mechanism for student learning? Do you see its benefits in your own classroom? If so, how does it bring about those benefits? What mechanisms do you use to bring distributed cognition into your classroom?

Part I: Understanding Essential Concepts

In a section headed "What Is Argument Literacy," Reznitskaya and Wilkinson write, "One of the most significant changes in language arts instruction today is the special attention given to argument. From major policy documents, academic publications, and the popular press, we hear the call for teachers to prepare their students to make well-reasoned judgments about complex, open-ended problems. . . . Although this focus on argument might seem like a new direction in education, it actually reflects decades of scholarship advocating for argumentation to be an integral part of students' experience throughout their schooling. . . . Quoting Gerald Graff, an English and education professor, the CCSS note that '"argument literacy" is fundamental to being educated. . . . The university is largely an "argument culture," . . . therefore, K-12 schools should "teach the conflicts" so that students are adept at understanding and engaging in argument (both oral and written) when they enter college.' . . . We define argument literacy as *the ability to comprehend, formulate, and evaluate arguments through speaking, listening, reading, and writing.*"

> Do you share Reznitskaya and Wilkinson's definition of "argument literacy"? Do you agree with the importance place on argument literacy by Gerald Graff and the Common Core? In what way do you see your use of academic argumentation in your classroom connected to, and preparation for, your students' functioning and thriving at the college level, if you do?

Reznitskaya and Wilkinson define their central concept. "Inquiry dialogue is a type of talk in which participants engage in argumentation to collectively formulate the most reasonable judgments. Inquiry dialogue . . . is cooperative in nature, and it is directed toward finding the truth, or as close to it as we can get, based on accurate reasons and evidence. . . . It is worth emphasizing that the purposes of inquiry dialogue is to collectively think about complex problems and to formulate reasonable judgments about these problems. During inquiry dialogue, participants do not simply try to win an argument – to convince each other that they are right by justifying their positions with reasons and evidence. At the same time, they are not engaging in dialogue just for the sake of uncritically sharing opinions. Instead, students take positions on the issue being discussed, they evaluate reasons and evidence for different positions, and they explore alternative perspectives – all to see which position survives this truth-seeking process."

> In what way do the authors implicitly define argumentation or debate that may not be fully shared by all practitioners of argument pedagogy? In what ways may the authors be asserting a distinction without a difference between inquiry dialogue and argumentation? In what ways might they suggest, though, a productive variation on argumentation?

The authors identify four criteria for evaluating argumentation and arguments.

Diversity of perspectives

We explore different perspectives together.

Clarity

We are clear in the language and structure of our arguments.

Acceptability of reasons and evidence

We use reasons and evidence that are well examined and accurate.

Logical validity

We are logical in the way we connect our positions, reasons, and evidence.

What are the strengths of this set of criteria and descriptors? What are its possible limitations, weaknesses, or gaps?

Reznitskaya and Wilkinson discuss the teacher's role in inquiry dialogue. "Finding the right level of involvement during inquiry dialogue is a tricky task because genuine inquiry is neither teacher-centered nor student-centered. Rather, it is truth-centered, with the teacher supporting the group's progress toward the truth, or the momst reasonable answer. . . . Yet, having the goal of finding the most reasonable answer is crucial for discussions that go beyond simply sharing opinions: this goal directs students to engage in *testing* different positions and reasons and *eliminating* those that fail to withstand the scrutiny of the group. This is why working toward the ost reasonable answer is challenging for teachers and students. It requires the ability to understand and apply the criteria for evaluating arguments."

Do you find the question of the teacher's role in a seminar or other form of classroom discussion a challenging one? Maybe even a vexing one? Or perhaps you have the teacher's role in discussion figured out? What is the proper role of the teacher in classroom discussion?

Part II: Planning and Conducting Discussions

Reznitskaya and Wilkinson discuss considerations for the post-discussion activity. "What makes a good post-discussion activity? A general principle to keep in mind when planning for an activity after discussion is *it's all about argument*. The activity should not simply prompt a general reflection from students. It should focus on argument or the parts of an argument."

Do you adhere to this principle in your own teaching? Why or why not? What are two examples of a post-discussion activity that you have used that have been especially effective?

Reznitskaya and Wilkinson reflect on selecting a good question for inquiry dialogue. "Identifying reasons on both sides [of a question for inquiry dialogue] is a good test to find out whether the big question is, in fact, contestable. If

we cannot come up with several reasons for and against a certain position, perhaps we need to revise the big question to make it truly controversial."

> What do the authors mean here? In what ways is this criterion for an effective question for inquiry dialogue similar to the ways that we have discussed formulating debatable issues?

Part III: Moving Forward

Reznitskaya and Wilkinson identify an important criterion when choosing texts to use for dialogic inquiry: they should have an internal, often implicit, embedded dialogue of ideas. "A good text for discussion has a dialogic quality. Here, we use the term *dialogic* in the sense described by Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian literary theorist and philosopher who wrote about texts and language. . . . Meaning, for Bakhtin, resides in the dynamic interplay among the multiple voices 'when different perspectives are brought together in a way that allows them to "inter-animate" or "inter-illuminate" each other.'"

> What do you think Bakhitin, and by extension the authors here, mean by *dialogic* in this sense? What texts or units have this quality, that you teach, and how and why do they have it? How do you or can you use it to advance and continue to improve your instruction?