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18 March 2014

Short Assignment 1

A Review of “Agonism in the Academy”

Although the intention of education is to provide students with the tools to guide their lives outside of the classroom, occasionally accepted teaching methods will leave students unable to cooperate with the world around them. Deborah Tannen’s article “Agonism in the Academy: Surviving Higher Learning’s Argument Culture” shares with her academic peers a subject of her research: the concept of agonism. In her article, Tannen argues that agonism is perpetuated by modern teaching practices and is destructive to academe at the educational level. While some may argue otherwise, Tannen’s presentation of agonism and its detrimental effects to the classroom create an article that is essential for any teacher to utilize in revising their own teaching curriculum.

Tannen describes agonism as a “metaphorical battle” in which disapproval of each other’s ideas supersedes constructive discussion. The opposition inherent in agonism does not arise from simple disagreement, it occurs as a result of an individual seeking benefit from condemning another’s argument. She clarifies this trend by stating that “good grades and good jobs – typically go to students and scholars who learn to tear down others’ work, not to those who learn to build on the work of their colleagues” (B8). Whether in the classroom or professional academic discourse, those that harshly criticize another’s argument often are received as more successful at the end of a debate. Agonism is defined by Tannen to be opposition to another’s ideas simply for self-benefit. Rather than seeking mutually beneficial cooperation and collaboration, agonism is a destructive force that renders an entire argument invalid rather than a jumping off point to deeper discussion.

Although some may claim Tannen’s article does not provide the tools to conflict agonism, her article certainly informs and enables teachers to challenge the perpetuation of agonism. By approaching the topic with a formal tone and examples of agonism in the classroom, Tannen’s work certainly establishes the occurrence of agonism which is of much importance to any teacher.

Tannen’s claim that agonistic behavior is introduced to students through teaching is supported with evidence in the classroom that teachers should certainly take the time to read. Tannen notes that by encouraging the critical analysis of classical works, teachers may unintentionally cause students to find faults in texts rather than appreciate literature. By “[assigning] scholarly work for them to read, then [inviting] them to tear it apart,” teachers may fail to let students synthesize their own ideas; instead teachers may be encouraging thoughtless and harsh critique (B7). With debate being praised in the classroom, students are taught that heated argument is more rewarding than collaborative discussion. Rather than actively participating in agonism, Tannen suggests that students can instead undergo cooperative tasks that develop understanding and appreciation for the material. Teachers can therefore create opportunities for students to openly discuss the material, free of criticism, and share their opinions without fear. Tannen provides a few pieces of evidence that support her case, including a study that states teachers prefer a difficult question rather than a “nice little supportive” one. These points prove that teachers may unintentionally support agonism in the classroom, and in reading this article teachers can remedy their instruction. By referencing these academic situations, Tannen strengthens her claim that agonism is taught to the student.

Through the repetition of scholarly examples, Tannen presents relatable situations to her academic audience that serve to support her case. Citations of personal experience and opinions from other scholars, which teachers can easily relate to, form the backbone of Tannen’s argument. These examples provide a strong case for agonism’s detrimental effects and further elaborate the presence of agonism to her readers. Through the opinions of other scholars, Tannen is able to better showcase the impact of agonism and allows for her claim to become truly important to her academic audience. The points that Tannen makes in her article are integral to any teacher’s curriculum, and truly understanding how teaching can encourage agonism in students requires the reading of her excellent article. In order to benefit their own students, any teacher should feel the need to read *Agonism in the Academy* to truly comprehend how they can improve their teaching curriculum.

Tannen has created a powerful and important argument that revolves around her concept of agonism. Her claim that agonism stems from teaching methods is backed with evidence and is crafted specifically for her academic audience. The presentation of an alternative to agonism – open discussion and collective understanding – foreshadows a call to action appearing later in her article. Tannen’s interesting perspective on teaching would be immensely beneficial for those in the academic community. In reading Tannen’s work, teachers can improve their own teaching methods and hopefully ponder the effects of their lessons on students. Tannen clearly states that “agonism is endemic in academe – and bad for it,” and her article further reflects on the destructive tendencies of agonism that teachers should be aware of. *Agonism in the Academy* is effective at describing the concept of agonism to the academic community and is an invaluable source of insight into one of the subconscious effects of teaching methods on students. Any teacher should take the time to read Tannen’s article in order to improve their method of instruction and to properly teach their own students.

Works Cited

Tannen, Deborah. "Agonism in the Academy: Surviving Higher Learning's Argument Culture." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 46.30 (2000): B7-B8. Web.