Chanelle Cadot

Burgin- Section A

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Assignment 1

Review of *Agonism in the Academy: Surviving Higher Learning’s Argument Culture*

Disagreements and arguments are commonplace in the academic world. With the constant emergence of new ideas and thoughts also comes the need to examine these new views with a critical eye. Sometimes this skepticism to new ideas is taken too far, and instead of merely trying to decide how worthwhile an academic’s work is, this work is so criticized that any value that the work may have contained is overlooked and only the supposed flaws are seen.

 In “Agonism in the Academy: Surviving Higher Learning’s Argument Culture”, Deborah Tannen examines this presence of the argumentative culture in higher learning and its effects on education and academic progress. With her use of anecdotes related to scholarly experiences of hers, the intended audience clearly appears to be other scholars who can relate to similar experiences. While Tannen’s work delves into such fields as psychology and linguistics, her audience is not expected to be involved in these fields or have any prior background knowledge of the subject she discusses. She occasionally mentions a word like “agonism” which may not be necessarily familiar to someone reading who is not affiliated with these kinds of studies, but she clearly defines these terms and thus makes this reading understandable for a much broader audience. This paragraph seems to have two distinct points that are not sufficiently tethered: central argument and audience.

 Tannen argues that agonism, or “ritualized opposition” is rampant in academia and destructive for the progress of academics. She lays the premise for this argument by using one of her own past experiences as an example of a time that agonism proved to be a roadblock to the stimulation and sharing of new ideas on a subject. In her experience, Tannen was at a reading group meeting where instead of talking about the interesting and worthwhile parts of the book, several members of the group critiqued and found faults in it. An opportunity was lost to discuss the importance of the book and learn new things about the text, and thus nothing was gained from the arguments that ensued over the book’s faults. Using this experience as an example, Tannen goes on to state such agonism is apparent and even encouraged in the classroom where it is also just as hindering to the growth of ideas. This growth of ideas is stunted because many scholars will tear apart and criticize the texts they read rather than integrating ideas with the work. Debating in the classroom is another facet of the educational system that Tannen disproves of suggesting that discussion instead of debate would help more students take part, and it would also give them a better understanding of the material while teaching them respect and open-mindedness to others’ work. Overall, Tannen argues that agonism in academia is bad for it, and that there should be more emphasis on the collaboration, not the tearing down, of ideas. Good synopsis of the central argument, though you might try to streamline a bit.

 Tannen makes a convincing argument that opposition in academia is bad for it on the premise that so many more new ideas and thoughts could arise if there wasn’t this instinctive impulse to criticize and tear down others’ work. She effectively backs up her argument with several examples as well as personal anecdotes that help her establish a connection with her audience. This connection allows the audience to better relate to Tannen’s own experiences, which in turn makes them more receptive and understanding of her argument. Keeping her scholarly audience in mind, Tannen makes references to instances that many scholars can think of and remember a time when they were in a similar situation. Tannen’s adeptness at writing towards her audience is what makes her argument so convincing and gives her credibility because she establishes herself as another scholar, which means that she has personal experience with the workings of academia and knows what it is like to be a scholar and facing an adversarial atmosphere.

 Overall, Tannen’s analysis of agonism in academia provides insight to the destructive qualities of opposition in education and provides suggestions for the collaboration of ideas instead of the destruction of them in order to improve the growth of ideas in academia. Tannen’s article would be worthwhile to read as a scholar of any kind because although the subject she discusses involves fields like linguistics and psychology, she writes basically to allow for someone with little or no background in these fields to be able to understand. Furthermore, scholars would find this read to be worthwhile and relatable to themselves because it is about the opposition and criticism that they are subjected to in their everyday lives.

Writer’s Memo

 I began this assignment by reading *The Sex and the Slayer* review in order to get a good idea on how to structure my own writing. I then reread the Tannen piece that I was going to review in order to make sure I had a clear understanding of the argument that she was making and to determine the way that she backed up her argument. I also remarked what she did well in her writing and what made her argument so compelling. Once I got a good idea of Tannen’s article, I made a rough outline of what I wanted each of the paragraphs to cover. I wanted to make sure that I spent a good portion of the review discussing her argument and how she developed it. My outline emphasized starting broadly with establishing a background for the article by discussing the argumentative culture in academia, and then I began to delve into more specifics as the paper progressed in analyzing the article itself. This is different than writing I did in high school because usually in those writings I was discussing a certain theme or answering a specific question about the book rather than analyzing and reviewing the book in general. I also wrote essays in high school about books where I was just summarizing the plot but not actually analyzing what the book was arguing. Things I think I did effectively in this paper was articulating the argument Tannen was making and how she supported her argument as well as starting broadly and then becoming more specific throughout the paper. I tried to be really clear about what Tannen was arguing and how she used examples and anecdotes to back up her points. I also made sure to define what agonism was because I assumed that the general audience wouldn’t know what that would mean. I also think I was effective at emphasizing the audience for Tannen’s article and how scholars in general could benefit from reading her piece. For the most part, I strived to make my analysis and summary of Tannen’s piece as concise and clear as possible.

Chanelle,

You definitely do a good job of providing a good sense of Tannen’s central argument, but also of establishing yourself as a reliable expert. Your command of the original article content comes through in a confident voice. What this piece really needs is not massive changes in terms of content or even organization (though some tweaks there might be beneficial, especially in the beginning), you just need a slight shift with regard to audience. You spend a lot of time delineating Tannen’s audience, but you seem to lose track of your own. Remember that chances are, they are one in the same. People are reading this review to decide whether or not they should read Tannen’s piece, so your task is to give them a sense of whether or not they are part of Tannen’s intended audience and will find her argument especially useful themselves. Explaining how we as readers (in a class) can identify the audience changes the context of your essay. With this shift and some polishing, you could have a strong review on your hands. Good work!