

Dahl Clark
UWC 5.48 Gier
9/9/99

My Version of “The Argument Culture”

In UWC5 class, we’re currently discussing the issue of “Environmentalism in America.” I originally signed up for this course because I wanted to learn more about how different groups of people are mutually working together to solve environmental problems. I did not expect that I would discover the deep “environmentalist/anti-environmentalist” polarization inherent in our society, and that progress toward solutions to our problems is slow. Only through hard work have I learned to keep an open mind in class when discussing the several name-calling, aggressive, condescending articles that “environmentalists” and “anti-environmentalists” have written against each other. I haven’t read an article yet where the author has acknowledged that discussing environmental issues is too complex to separate discussion into just two sides. I also haven’t read an article yet where a particular group of people, such as loggers or conservationists, weren’t harshly labeled or excluded by the text. Never in my life have I read any article on the environment where a self-proclaimed “environmentalist” or “anti-environmentalist” *briefly* embraced the other side’s viewpoint and tried to understand the reasons behind the other side’s position. This discomforts me. I’m worried that we will destroy our environment not because of pollution and the myriad of other man-made problems that plague it, but because we’ll allow it to go to waste while we lash out at each other, call each other names, and aggressively take sides because we believe it’s the only way to discuss things.

I feel that the “argument culture” that Deborah Tannen describes in her book does exist, and that this culture is dangerous when it limits how well we can educate ourselves about important issues. For example, the environment is something very important to all of us, since we live here on the earth and are sustained by it. It is something many people are interested in, and consequently, they have written books about it. People like Paul and Anne Ehrlich, avid environmentalists who authored “Betrayal of Science and Reason,” wrote their book (which we’re reading in UWC5 class) for a reason. People just don’t sit

down together one day and decide to write a 335-page book. With similar reasoning, I believe that many other authors of books had a purpose in mind when they began writing their books. A book is a form of expression; if a person has an idea that she or he wishes to share with others, a great place to do so is in a book. Books reach many people, just as other forms of audio, television, and computer-based media do today. Ideally, if a person writes a book, then this tells me that their reason for writing the book must have been very important to them, and if a person reads a book, the person must feel the book is important, too. Columnists in newspapers write their columns because they feel the public should hear the interesting things they have to say. Physics professors write physics books because they enjoy their subject and want to share their knowledge with others. Authors of environmental books write their books because they feel the environment is an important issue, and the public needs to be informed about it. Unfortunately, when people start taking sides without giving further thought to the books or other media they encounter, we close off other avenues of thought that might help us to better understand what we've learned. When we are polarized, authors can't reach us, and we don't want to listen to what they have to say.

Although I find Tannen's ideas on the "argument culture" reasonable and open-minded, I believe it's necessary to modify her ideas a bit. It isn't only necessary to listen to multiple viewpoints, but to also gain something from listening to them. Just as we can blankly stare at a nice picture without processing in our minds the importance or meaning of it, we can listen to the five different things that five people had to say about a subject. I gave this example to support my belief that some form of thinking has to be done after listening to a dialogue between people. That is, we should distill from those viewpoints things that we've found useful and valuable. To do this, we have to take some kind of position when approaching a new subject, which is something Tannen does not explicitly mention in the chapters I read. However, in parallel with Tannen's ideas, we must try to take an active position without creating a separation between ourselves and "the other side."