THE FALLACY OF OVER-ASSESSING
An Inquiry Into Quizzing as a Tool for Cooperative Learning

Abstract

The problem of civic engagement necessarily entails the problem of argumentation. More specifically, it requires that citizens be critical consumers of public arguments. A central mode of critique encompasses the exposition of fallacious reasoning. This portfolio illustrates a strategy used to train students in the ability to recognize, criticize, and even reproduce fallacies of argument. In particular, it establishes regular quizzes as a mode of cooperative learning that enables students to interrogate fallacies, produce exemplars, contribute to shared knowledge, and therefore move away from mere memorization and toward understanding. It also argues for a focus on cooperative learning as a mode of assessment, by which students create that which they “should” know. Furthermore, as a constituent element of a much larger ethos of diverse logic, fallacies of argument are shown herein to be part and parcel to a broader critical practice. This portfolio ultimately presents a case for quizzing as an effective tool for both cooperative and “extended” learning.

Objective

The purpose of training students to be able to recognize, criticize, and even reproduce fallacies of argument is primarily to empower them to become critical producers and consumers of arguments. Hence why the investigation of fallacies is interrelated in the study of informal reasoning as a critical tool, not as a program of study. Hence also why the scrutiny of fallacies is an essential tool for inspecting one’s own argument as much as one’s opposition.

The teaching challenge is concurrently the learning challenge, since both have to do with the fact that students must memorize the fallacies and be able to recall them based on (a) their name alone, (b) their definition, and/or (c) an example of them from public discourse. To facilitate memorization, a worksheet comprised of every fallacy is provided to the students. Fallacies are categorized by groups, of which there are seven: causal, emotional, formal, logical, personal, social, and strategic. Each group is defined by the shared characteristics of fallacies subsumed in it, and each fallacy therein is accompanied by a definition and at least one example. To facilitate memorization one thing: To facilitate understanding (or the capacity to produce arguments, even fallacious ones), it seems to me, is another matter entirely.

The overall objective is to enable students to recall and evaluate any one of the thirty-six fallacies on cue. As one might imagine, this is no simple task.

Intervention

- 10-15 minutes of class time each day before the midterm exam dedicated to fallacies.
- Cooperative learning assignments:
  - Each student chooses a fallacy, and then presents the fallacy in the form of a visually engaging presentation to class.
  - Cycle of Feedback on fallacy work.
  - Quiz on each group of fallacies.
  - 50 percent of midterm exam = fallacies.

Hypotheses, Data & Conclusions

HYPOTHESIS I

The cooperative learning assignments will enable students to learn the fallacies together, enhancing individual comprehension. The daily quizzes will reinforce the concepts learned cooperatively and will help students memorize and retain the fallacies.

HYPOTHESIS II

The cooperative learning assignments, paired with the quizzes and student-created questions, will yield high grades on the midterm examination.

Fallacy is an argument that appears to be reasonable and/or defensible but is in fact not. A fallacy is specious. It is not, however, enough for an advocate simply to point this out. An advocate must always provide his or her own reasoning as to why an argument is fallacious and thus problematic. This can be done in a number of ways, not least of which includes calling attention to (a) unsound or insufficient proof for a proposition, (b) errors in the form of reasoning, (c) misleading claims that are incorrect as a result either of mistake or intent, (d) conclusions unjustified by propositional and/or evidential support, and so on.