The gentle art of persuasion

The Age, Feb 14, 2014 by Bob Hillman

The school year is under way in earnest and it is timely to consider the section from the English course that is perhaps the most relevant to our everyday lives and the one that is very much a life skill: the persuasive use of language.

Area of Study 3 challenges students to develop the capacity to analyse the way in which language is used to persuade. The current English Study Design describes this section as "the analysis and comparison of the use of language in texts that debate a topical issue which has appeared in the Australian media since September 1 of the previous year".

The official assessment will form one of three outcomes completed in Unit 3 and the skills and knowledge developed throughout the year will be tested in the examination at the end of the year.

The essential nature of this area of study is to explore and explain how writers and speakers use language in an attempt to influence their audiences' thinking about an issue. It is important to reflect on the idea that this cannot be achieved effectively with an occasional exercise done in class. The insights and skills require constant refining, development and practice.

The skill of language analysis is one that develops over time, and a wise student will take the opportunity to read and consider how language is being used as often as possible.

Each day *The Age* is a rich source of relevant material, with a variety of people from the community attempting to persuade their readers in a variety of ways, using many different approaches and styles.

On most days the hottest topic being debated will be sectioned off in the letters pages, often with an accompanying photograph, which also warrants analysis. One strategy for developing analysis skills is to have a notebook in which students take it upon themselves to analyse letters or articles from the opinion pages, building insights throughout the year and polishing the skills that are so important for a thoughtful, successful individual in society.

The issue itself does not necessarily have to be directly relevant to Australia; the Study Design states that it must appear in the Australian media.

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With that in mind, I was drawn by an article from *The Age* on Friday, February 14, in the World section, foreshadowing legislation in Belgium that would "extend euthanasia laws to children". This topic of euthanasia is a perennial one and Australia continues to grapple with its position on this contentious issue, although at the moment it is clear there is no political desire to change the current prohibition of voluntary euthanasia.

Not surprisingly, the following day (Saturday, February 15) there were two strongly opinionated letters in *The Age* and they are useful to explore as sample analyses.

The letters are reprinted below:

**An appalling law**

*So it has come to this. The Belgian parliament has passed legislation to legalise child "euthanasia" (World, 14/2). A child cannot give consent. This legislation is introducing "involuntary euthanasia" and that is a euphemism for murder.*

*According to your article, the law goes beyond Dutch legislation that sets a minimum age of 12 for children judged mature enough to decide to end their lives. Hitler introduced a "euthanasia" program, which included children among its tens of thousands of victims.*

*Dr Bill Anderson, Surrey Hills*

**A bold step forward**

*Belgium, where voluntary euthanasia has existed for 12 years, has extended freedom of choice to children. In Australia, this choice is only legalised for animals and has recently been blocked for humans by conservative state governments. Where are our democratic rights?*

*Beverley McIntyre, Camberwell*

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It is difficult to consider two more contrasting views, where in each case the writer invites readers to share his or her point of view. They are brief but offer a rich opportunity to polish analysis skills.

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In an outraged letter, Dr Anderson decries the new Belgian legislation. He opens with a sense of resignation and perhaps even inevitability, "So it has come to this." The words suggest the notion of a moral slippery slope that has been developing in modern society and that it has now reached a nadir with this legislation. When describing the bill, he places quotation marks around "euthanasia", implying that it is a misnomer; that the word's true meaning is being corrupted. This is followed by a short, emphatic sentence that is at the heart of his contention, "A child cannot give consent". He is challenging readers to consider their view about the capability of a child – the word itself imbued with naivety and vulnerability. This is also implied when he suggests they are "judged old enough", the implication clearly suggesting they are not. The two previous sentences have set the reader up for the conclusion he wishes them to hold: euthanasia is nothing more than a "euphemism" for "murder". The concept of infanticide strikes at the very heart of paternalistic compassion.

Once Dr Anderson has set his audience up to see this legislation as legalised "murder", he compares it with the Dutch law, where the minimum age for voluntary euthanasia is 12. Traditionally, the Dutch have been perceived as liberal – and for some, far too liberal – and this is meant to present a perspective that appears outrageous by comparison. He saves his most dramatic notion for last, confronting his audience with the arch-evil Hitler introducing a similar scheme, but one that was, of course, abused for insidious means. To link legislation with that of the Nazi regime is to attempt to horrify readers who would be appalled (note the headline) by even a hint of revisiting that dark chapter in human history.

In almost direct contrast, Ms McIntyre celebrates the legislation and bemoans Australia's reluctance to follow suit. She opens her brief letter with a fact that in Belgium, "voluntary euthanasia has existed for 12 years". Clearly the implication is that it has been successful, with little disputation. Time is being used here as evidence of euthanasia's acceptance and its veracity. In presenting her case, Ms McIntyre uses the phrase "freedom of choice"; this notion is fundamental to a liberal democracy and is central in her appeal to readers. It also forms the basis of the contrast between her opinion and that of Dr Anderson. In "extend[ing]" euthanasia to children it is presented as a basic human right. Once she has established this democratic right, its absence in Australia is held up for ridicule. When describing that choice as "only legalised for animals", she is suggesting we are disempowered and unable to determine our own fate. This contrast with animals is intended to be perceived as absurd, with humans faring worse than beasts. The opportunity to now direct blame for the situation is presented in the form of "conservative state governments", clearly implying that their very conservatism is anachronistic and even undemocratic, out of touch with more liberal countries. The implication of the headline, "A bold step forward", is held as the opposite of Australia's position, which seems to be lagging. Ms McIntyre ends her letter with a challenging question, "Where are our democratic rights?" She has used this legislation in Belgium as a platform to vilify conservatism in Australian politics and its impact on the members of Australian society.

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It is interesting to note that the letters themselves contained a total of 120 words, yet the analysis of these two short opinionative pieces extended to more than five times that number. Each day *The Age* offers thoughtful students the prospect of carefully considering the way people in our society use language to attempt to persuade those around them. I hope the students of Victoria take advantage of this opportunity.

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