

Julia Wingfield

I was interested in joining this “RS Argument” group because I strongly believe in the value of the argumentation skills which are taught in RS, not only in order to support students to achieve in their GCSEs but also for developing higher order thinking skills and the academic skills required for further education. I wanted to teach my students more than the restrictive paragraph structures, mechanical sentence starters and Point – Evidence – Explain frameworks.

In one of the early meetings, I was asked to read Chapter 2 of Toulmin’s “The Uses of Argument” and present a summary to the group. This was a challenging read, which forced me to think deeply about what it actually meant by an “argument”.

One of the analogies which Toulmin referred to in this chapter was that of a courtroom. I knew that many of my students had an interest in Law. I wondered whether the analogy of a courtroom could be one which would engage my students and extend their understanding of argumentation beyond just writing a paragraph in an exam-style question.

By January, we were in lockdown and I was working remotely with students online. I decided to test out a small-scale project with a group of three Year 11 students who attended my online lessons on Islam. We spent the first lesson talking about courtrooms and how it might link to our classroom debates and discursive essays. I found that the students had been exposed to enough courtroom scenes in films or television drama to have an understanding of court procedures.

We identified that there was an initial period when the lawyer and their research team might spend time collecting evidence and studying the knowledge that they already had about a case. We linked this to an initial period before starting to write the essay in which we might collect together, either mentally or on a planning sheet, everything that we know already about a particular topic or keyword in the exam question. This might involve a process of sifting through all that we have learnt about a religion and its teachings and applying this knowledge to the statement, selecting material for our “case”. Finally, we discussed how a court hearing is conducted, with a “prosecution”, “defence” and “Judge and jury”.

I gave the group a hypothesis to consider, which was “There are more similarities than differences between Sunni and Shi’a Islam.” For their home-learning task, I sent off my students to individually do some research about this issue as if they were a team of researchers working for a law firm.

In the second lesson, students returned with their “evidence”, and we spent some time discussing and sorting it. At the end of this lesson, I allocated the roles of “prosecution lawyer” (supporting the statement), a “defence lawyer” (arguing against the statement) and a “judge”. The students then went away to prepare their arguments and/or consider the evidence.

In the third and final online lesson, each “lawyer” presented their case. Both students had written up a paragraph which they read out. The “judge” was encouraged (with some prompting by me) to comment on the arguments being presented, and to ask questions for clarification. Lawyers were also allowed to “object” and put forward counter-arguments during the proceedings, and comment on whether they felt the evidence supported their opponent’s case. After this 30-minute debate lesson, the group went away to write up their essay.

The students all responded positively to the project, saying that they had a better understanding of what was being asked of them in the 12-mark exam question. I believe that it would be beneficial to integrate this approach and analogy further into both the GCSE and KS3 schemes of work and this is now my new project for the coming year.