

Chapter 18

Lending a “Hand” to Exploring Different Perspectives: A Guide for Teachers and Students

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ABSTRACT

This chapter seeks to empower teachers and students of the General Paper (GP) with an approach to exploring different perspectives of a topic or issue. It offers a practical, systematic approach to guide students in generating questions to broaden perspectives and extend discussion drawing on specific domains, and to provide teachers a lead into the appropriate scaffolding required to widen the depth and scope of discussion. It does not promise to be an exhaustive solution to topical analysis and discussion but serves as a useful starting point for engagement with a topic from where it can take off on a higher plane in argumentative writing.

INTRODUCTION

The most important function of the GP has long been recognised to be “to prepare students for the very special skills of academic reading and writing which they will need in order to make the most of their tertiary education” (Ashworth, 1992: 13). The GP essay itself illustrates the significance which is attached to the skills of writing required in higher education. According to the GP syllabus, “maturity of thought, independent thinking and the proficient use of language” (Ministry of Education, UCLES, 2005: 1) underscore the subject. It might be said that the GP is treated both as a preparation for university study and as an indicator that the student has attained a level of proficiency in the English Language which would qualify him/her for admission to the university. If, then, it is assumed that the GP essay is intended not merely to build up the student’s general proficiency in English but also to develop the skills of discourse which are particularly relevant for university education, the GP then clearly has a critical role in helping students to acquire the academic discourse skills required in tertiary education (Ho, 1995).

CRITICAL SKILLS REQUIRED IN THE GENERAL PAPER

The GP set by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) and offered to students in Singapore has always been intended to cater to the overall development of students. Specifically, it is aimed at providing the "enrichment, maturity and experience so necessary to their self-realisation and social awareness" (Summary of Reports from Schools¹, 1970: 3). From 2006, under the revised pre-university curriculum, as a Higher 1 (H1) level "Knowledge skill" subject, "students' thinking, process and communication skills" (Ministry of Education, 2004a, online) as a skills-based subject continue to be at the very core and essence of the subject.

According to the current GP syllabus, among the assessment objectives and skills aimed at are the following specifically targeted at candidates' ability to: "acquire knowledge and understanding of diverse topic areas through extensive reading and independent study, analyse and evaluate issues across disciplines, show awareness of their significance and implications for the individual and society, express understanding as well as critical and creative thinking through informed personal responses, formulate cogent arguments" (Ministry of Education, UCLES, 2005: 1).

Due to the types of essay questions set which, as indicated in the introductory chapter, are becoming more open-ended in recent years, the need to equip students with the specific skills required to "read extensively and express an informed, critical, creative and relevant response" (ibid: 3) to issues becomes even more critical. This necessitates exploring issues from a broader perspective without becoming too narrow or restraining in one's focus leading to an unbalanced viewpoint.

THE "HAND" APPROACH

One approach to enable students to generate questions in order to broaden their perspectives on an issue based on specific domains is offered as a possible means to meet the demands of the essay requirements. It also offers teachers an opportunity to provide the appropriate scaffolding required to widen the depth and scope of discussion on any topic or issue.

¹ Summary of Reports from Schools. Presented at "Seminar on the teaching of the GP in Higher School Certificate Classes", Singapore, 11 August 1969.

Students who face difficulty in extending discussion revolving around specific points and/or who may need help with a starting point from where to begin their exploration of a topic may benefit from this approach. While organising tools such as graphic or visual organisers and concept maps are useful as skeletal or framing structures for initiating discussion, the actual content development and navigation around a topic require more than just an outline of a visual map or construct. This is where the following approach described goes one step further beyond being a mere skeletal framework to actually stimulating students' thinking and promoting ideas generation along specific dimensions in a systematic way.

Students writing essays on their own as under examination or test timed conditions have only themselves, their stationery and question paper with them. What would serve as a useful guide for them in planning to write their argumentative essay is a simple, practical approach using what they already have with them – that is, their own hands.

In this approach, the thumb and each of the remaining four fingers on either hand represents a specific domain from where questions are generated related to the topic or issue at hand. The domain represented attempts to draw on easily remembered or familiar areas with which we associate the thumb and each of the four fingers we have. The task is to formulate appropriate and relevant questions which would serve as a springboard for critically analysing a given topic or issue and for extending further development of the discussion.

Figure 18.1 illustrates the specification of domains based on the hand approach:

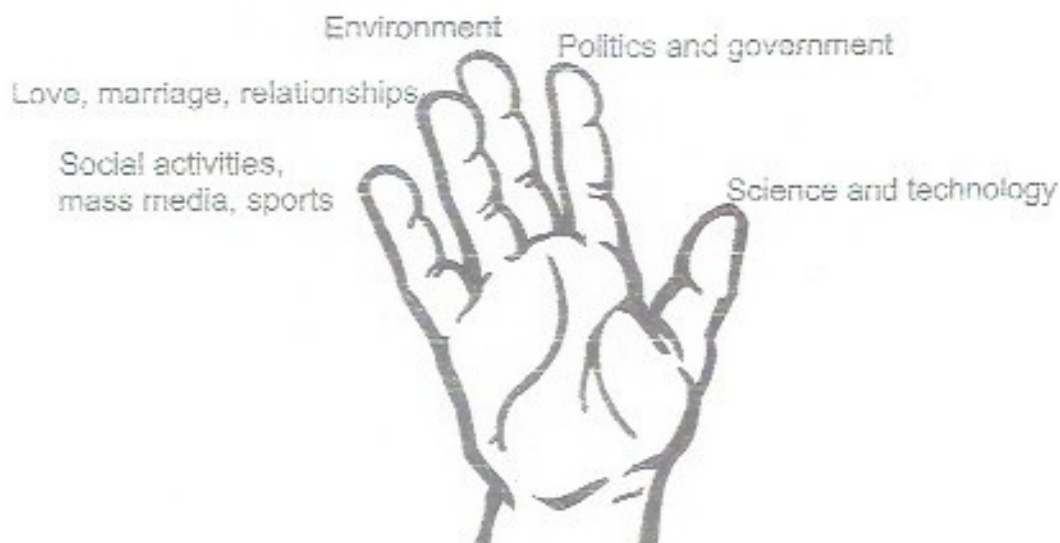


Figure 18.1 The "Hand" Approach to Exploring Perspectives

What follows is an explanation of the component parts making up the hand and what each represents in terms of domains for further exploration and discussion:

Thumb – Science and Technology

The thumb represents "do-it-yourself" methods or techniques through mechanisms, gadgets or tools which technology has provided for or made possible. This domain corresponds to the field of science and technology.

Index Finger – Politics and Government

This is the finger with which people tend to use to point at or to others as in telling others what to do or in pinpointing specifics. This is the domain of politics and government revolving around issues of power, control and/or authority.

Middle Finger – Environment

This is the middle finger which is positioned at the centre of our hand with two other fingers on either side of it. It is the environment and all there is in it, together with the surrounding context, which is the domain represented here.

Fourth Finger – Love, Marriage, Relationships

This is the finger on which we traditionally wear a ring. The domain of love, marriage, family and social network or relationships is associated with this finger here.

Last Finger (“Pinkie”) – Social Activities, Mass Media, Sports

The last finger or “pinkie” as is commonly referred to represents all else in life which brings fulfilment and enjoyment, and makes life meaningful without which there is no balance. The domain of social activities, mass media, sports, culture and the arts is reflected here.

APPLICATION TO ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

This section shows the application of the “hand” approach by students who worked on selected questions drawn from the UCLES General Paper examinations. The student-generated questions are unedited.

Q1: “The truth should always be old, whatever the cost”. (1997)

There is a tendency for students attempting this type of question to remain solely at the level of their personal world. In order to elevate discussion beyond the personal realm, a need remains to go beyond personal relations and issues. The following suggests a possible approach to the topic by applying the “hand” approach with sample questions offered:

Consider the concept and nature of truth, degrees or levels of truth, truth versus falsehood.

Science and technology – In the medical field, for instance, is there a case for doctors to withhold the truth from patients in certain instances? Would this be in the interest of patients? Why or why not? What about the case of scientific research and development? Can the same argument be applied?

Politics and government – Does a line need to be drawn between the public and personal life of political leaders? Can and should one separate or conceal personal foibles or weaknesses from public view? Where does one draw the line? To what extent is maintaining what is perceived to be the “truth” at all times important?

Environment – Is there a price to be paid for not being able to convey critical information to agencies/countries/organisations who

may need this for a specific purpose? For example, U.S. seismologists not revealing information on the Sumatran undersea earthquake to others likely to be affected and the implications of this.

Relationships – In the sphere of family or work relationships, what are the consequences of not being honest and transparent to members involved? How does one's religion or faith feature in this? Does it have any ethical/moral bearing and implications?

Social activities, mass media, sports – The implications, problems and extent of the mass media concealing the truth of news items from their audience. Are there instances where withholding the truth from the audience can be justified?

Q2: "Science never provides solutions – It only poses more problems". (2000)

Science and technology – How scientific and technological advancement bring about both pluses and minuses to the community at large. Instances where initial breakthroughs in specific fields, for example, medical or biotechnology leading to other complications or problems in the long run. Consideration of limitations or constraints in specific areas and suggestions for recommending what can be done to overcome these.

Politics and government – The role of government in controlling or influencing scientific or technological research and expenditure in specific fields, namely, nuclear warfare, biological and chemical agents and the implications of these.

Environment – The resulting effects on the environment as a result of scientific and technological advancement. Does the latter contribute to the overall environmental degradation in specific communities?

Relationships – The impact of an increasingly information and communications technology (ICT)-savvy and mobile population under the influence of the rapid pace of technological change and innovation; how family or other relationships are affected in terms of quality time spent and the possible erosion of moral values of the younger generation.

Social activities, mass media, sports – Focusing on sports, how does modern day or alternative enhancements for an individual's physique and overall well-being impact on how "wellness" is viewed or

perceived. Implications of problems with implants; the ethics of sportsmanship with the use of drug-induced enhancements and supplements.

Q3: “In the modern world, image is everything.” Discuss. (2000)

Discussion of what constitutes “image”, mental representation, concept of branding, nature or type of picture presented/projected, issue of appearances versus reality.

Science and technology – Issue of popular appeal of research with more immediate results for the public good versus intrinsic scientific value and purpose of long-term research and development. The question of research funding based on more “visible” studies with greater impact on and commercial appeal to masses versus smaller-scale, isolated studies in other areas for the purpose of contributing to knowledge for knowledge sake. The expert-novice divide and implications on research and development. The economics of research versus marketing and profitability or commercialisation concerns arising from studies or subject matter experts, e.g. advertising and commercialising of medical service – should doctors be allowed to advertise?

Politics and government – The balance between popular image and mass appeal versus personal integrity and private life of leaders. The commercialisation and publicity of leading figures. The role of public relations and implications of this on perceptions of the public. The machinery and mechanisms of influencing public support. The implications of the public-private lines of boundary; the issue of the privacy and rights of the individual. The role of grassroots and local community support or the lack of it, and impact of “image” building in this area.

Environment – The glorification of natural tragedies and disasters – e.g. tsunami catastrophe milked by local and foreign media for marketing and commercialisation purposes: trailers using scenes of tsunami as advertising technique; films made from disasters in the movie industry. The “shock” treatment technique. Rights and responsibilities of the media.

Relationships – The appeal and impact of looks/ appearances versus character/personality. Implications on relationship choice and impact. Surface appearance versus inner strength of character.

Social activities, mass media, sports – Impact and influence of the media on viewers' perceptions; social engineering through role of media; use of authority figures for branding purposes and implications; examining validity and credibility issues.

Students who have used this approach have found it particularly useful in dealing with any type of question set for the GP essay. These include philosophical questions as in Q1 above and those which may appear more abstract in nature as in Q3 apart from the more favoured topics of students as in Q2. The approach allows students to "get into" a topic by providing various angles for initiating discussion. As a student of mine once put it, "When I am stuck for ideas, I just look at my hand and this helps me to start thinking of other areas for exploring the question". The various domains essentially provide different pathways from where to navigate around a topic in a more focused manner. Different lines of inquiry are sparked off given the various domains to help promote discussion and maintain specific strand(s) of argumentation. The challenge is to develop questions which will shape the forthcoming discussion that unfolds as the essay progresses.

SCAFFOLDING STUDENTS' THINKING

In using the approach, I have observed that it demands of students who are new to or less familiar with this approach much more than what teachers may perhaps realise right at the outset. Students who are generally weaker in conceptualising arguments may require further help in even formulating questions based on the specific domains identified. Indeed, it takes practice and patience on the part of the teacher to encourage explorations by students of a topic along specific lines of inquiry as they are guided into developing questions for themselves based on specific areas. Creativity and imagination on the part of students in conceptualising useful and relevant questions for discussion to take off in the essay go a long way in directing the flow of argumentation for topics chosen. This is where leading or guiding questions on the part of teachers to help prompt and scaffold students' thinking along particular lines would help. The following are some suggestions:

- How does this domain X relate to the topic you have chosen?
- Are there specific questions you want to raise based on domain X for the given topic?

- Can you think of specific examples from domain X to justify or support the argument(s) you are making?
- Do you have relevant and/or sufficient evidence based on domain X for the topic?
- What can you draw on in domain X to link to the topic given?
- How would the topic chosen be perceived differently if domain X is not included or addressed?

These are a sampling of various ways of questioning to interpret a given topic in relation to specific domains. There may certainly be overlap of questions in some instances, and teachers are encouraged to experiment and devise other helpful guiding questions of their own along the same line. Ultimately, the aim is to come up with useful and focused questioning based on particular domains in order to further develop or shape the writer's overall arguments. Students who are generally weaker have been noted to benefit from careful and structured scaffolding to guide their thinking in the use of "this approach.

CONSIDERATIONS IN PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATION

As with any other pedagogical approach or strategy, there are considerations which need to be borne in mind when implementing it in the classroom. Teachers are to be careful in their use of this approach to avoid running the risk of becoming too diffused in attempting to open up a topic for discussion. The danger is to cut across too wide a spectrum of perspectives to the extent of sacrificing depth in analysis and a thorough discussion of particular aspects of a topic or issue. The approach suggested does not necessarily demand meticulous and detailed coverage of each and every single one of the five domains suggested for every topic discussed. It is up to the individual writer to be selective in deciding on appropriate, selected areas for further analysis and extension of discussion which would be consistent with his/her overall stand taken and, more, which would reinforce the underlying stand of his/her argument.

What the approach offers is to empower student writers to begin thinking along specific lines of inquiry which may facilitate the development of an argument(s) with regard to a topic. The opening up of specific areas for discussion based on selected domains is ultimately to be aligned with the writer's overall stand on the topic or issue. The

task is for a careful opting of select domains, and balancing of perspectives in the elaboration and development of the individual's particular line of argumentation. The question of quantity of points versus the quality and strength of each argument supported or justified by relevant examples becomes all the more critical with such an approach. The need for a careful weighing and balancing of priorities and perspectives remains paramount if this approach is to remain effective and work to the advantage of the student. With more practice, creativity and sensitivity on the part of students guided by a teacher's skilful scaffolding, aligning particular domains with the specifics that will inform and direct or influence discussion, and shape the content in the rest of an argumentative essay can become a reality.

CONCLUSION

The approach suggested in this chapter does not pretend to offer a comprehensive one-off solution to students' attempts at argumentative GP essay-writing. Neither is it a guarantee for absolute logical coherence in the overall structuring of a writer's argumentation. What it seeks to provide teachers and students with is a practical means for exploring areas for further discussion, and in developing strands of argumentation by triggering off thought along specific domains. This is done through, it is hoped, a simple, systematic association of ideas which is easily applicable to any topic for discussion. What the approach offers to both teachers and students is to lend a helping "hand" to exploring different perspectives. This is only the starting point. How exactly the essay ultimately takes off on separate planes or strands of argumentation is really left to the individual writer to develop, shape and concretise. It is hoped that what results eventually is a cogent, convincing and credible argumentative piece, drawing on various viewpoints and perspectives with the writer's voice distinctly heard running through the text.

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