

Staging Historical Argument: History I at the University of the Western Cape*

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Introduction

This article focuses on the lecture-room debates which have been the central feature of the first-year history course at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) since 1993.¹ The UWC History Department takes the position that in first-year teaching the main aim should be to show students that the discipline is always contested and to introduce them to historical argument.² The article makes a case for these lecture-room debates as a developmental sequence or series for the induction of first-year UWC students into historical argument in discussion, reading and writing.

The article discusses the lecture-room debates as an attempt to 'stage' historical argument for students. Firstly, in the debates, lecturers take up conflicting positions and argue with each other in front of an audience of students in the lecture theatre. Each debate is intended to dramatise conflicts between historians on a specific issue in the course and at the same time show that history is a contested discipline. Secondly, the debates are planned as a series to develop historical argument stage by stage. For instance, the first debate is intended to show a simple, polarised contest but later debates set out to demonstrate more complex forms of historical argument.

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- 1 The lecture-debates were introduced in 1993 by the first-semester co-ordinator, Leslie Witz. Since 1994, Premesh Lалу, as co-ordinator of the first semester, has continued the experiment. Carohn Cornell has worked with first-year lecturers since mid-1992 on the planning and evaluation of the course. Since 1993, the debates have also been a feature of the second- semester course co-ordinated by Dr Sue Newton-King.
 - 2 For a full account, see C. Cornell and L. Witz, 'The Debate Continues: Critical Perspectives on the Development of the History I Curriculum at the University of the Western Cape', in M. Walker, ed., *AD Dialogues*, 2 (Bellville, 1994), 97-102.