

Shifting from Pro/Con to Conversation in Argument Writing

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Abstract: This paper, which uses research supported through a partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and funded with a grant through the National Writing Project, explores best practices from five published texts to encourage students to talk and write about complex issues.

Why focus on argument?

“Wait...what should I say?”

“Wait...how do I start?”

“Wait...what parts do I need?”

Argumentative writing has long presented a challenge for both me as an instructor and for my novice writers. I'd dutifully create an assignment sheet for the Persuasive Research Paper in the spring of each year and provide students with the academic vocabulary: do you have a hook? Do you have a claim? Do you use appeals ground in ethos, pathos, and logos? Do you have a counterclaim? Do you have a rebuttal? I'd create a graphic organizer that showed students where these parts of the argument should go. And I continued to be unhappy with the results of these efforts.

Given this instruction, students' final papers had sentences marked with the vocabulary they had been given. But their arguments, at best, were simplistic. Three part claims which reflected the content of their body paragraphs were used. Their counterclaims, almost all introduced with “some may say,” did not always logically follow their arguments. Rebuttals, if given, were rarely supported with evidence. But

most importantly, the arguments that students constructed did not demonstrate a depth of thinking. And I wasn't sure of how to get them to think more deeply and reflect that thinking in their writing.

Enter the College, Career, and Community Writers Program (C3Wp), an additional program offered for National Writing Project teacher consultants, which looks to coach teachers and students to read nonfiction resources critically, explore multiple points of view, and take a stand on important current issues. This program was offered as an advanced institute for teacher consultants through my chapter of the National Writing Project at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, facilitated by co-directors Donna Pasternak and Jenny Husa.

When the opportunity to participate in the program was offered to me, I was immediately interested. I'd come to see what I did not want my students to do in their argument writing but was unsure of how to coach them toward truly nuanced thinking. When I found out I had been accepted, I quickly confirmed my spot. Thus began my transformation.

The Ongoing Conversation on Argumentation

To prepare for the three-day advanced institute, I was given four textbooks to examine: Garcia and O'Donnell-Allen's *Pose, Wobble, Flow* (2015), Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* (2014), Harris's *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* (2006), and McCann's *Transforming Talk into Text* (2014). These books looked to prepare readers for the discomfort that sometimes occurs when learning new information, to disrupt some current ideas on a pro/con discourse around argument, and to revise that discourse with a more nuanced approach to argument which prioritizes multiple perspectives.

My real “ah-ha” moments came when I was immersed in McCann’s *Transforming Talk into Text*. McCann reminded me of the importance of peer collaboration in creating cohesive responses, stating “In learning about important processes for thinking about problems and composing logical and elaborated responses, students benefit from their interactions with peers” (p. 44). A little later, McCann adds that “There is a clear positive correlation: the more opportunities to talk with peers as a part of the writing process translate into higher quality, more elaborated compositions” (p. 44).

I considered what McCann had stated in relation to my past argument practice. Most of my instruction on argumentation had previously been within a unit of study. In that unit, I would introduce the parts of an argument, allow students to choose a topic of interest, and create a claim and argument about that topic. As all argument instruction took place within the context of a unit of study, students would produce one which used nonfiction sources. And since they could pick any topic of choice, having a talking partner within class was not a guarantee as they formed their ideas.

McCann’s ideas about building capacity for responding to problems did not seem to be suited for just a unit of study. It seemed to me that in order to practice the type of talk and elaborated responses I desired, students would need multiple attempts to examine a problem and compose responses. It also seemed that students would need multiple opportunities to talk with one another and revise their writing as their thinking evolved about a single problem.

Maybe argument could not be a unit of study. According to my readings, truly effective argument instruction would be an ongoing routine, which built discussions into writing. But how?

Graff and Birkenstein’s *They Say/I Say* (2014) helped my thinking evolve. The authors maintain that argument writing is at heart a conversation. In discussing nonfiction topics, students are joining a conversation that has already been happening. So, before offering opinions on a topic (I say), they must first be able to articulate the ongoing conversation in the source (they say). Once they understand the basic necessity of acknowledging the ongoing conversation they enter when writing, they pursue

variations of “they say/I say” in order to agree with source material, counter source material, accept portions of source material, and extend source material to other fields.

As I read this text, I began to consider if using these moves in speaking would help students transition them into their writing.

Creating a Plan of Action

On August 1, 2016, I began the three-day institute, meant to introduce the C3WP’s best classroom practices for building capacity in creating arguments. C3WP calls for the routine integration of argument writing with source text. No longer an argument be siloed into a unit. Instead, over the course of a school year students need multiple opportunities to interact with sources.

One of the many routines introduced was an exercise called “Writing into the Day,” which calls for the use of text sets organized around one topic. Each day, students read a different text and begin by charting their thinking using the prompts: what is the main topic? What would you like to know more about? No more than fifteen minutes of class time should be used when “Writing into the Day.” To me, this routine seemed like a place to start integrating more regular argument practice into my classroom.

Purely by chance, I encountered another text while thinking about argument: Ritchhart, Church, and Morrison’s *Making Thinking Visible: How to Promote Engagement, Understanding and Independence for All Learners* (2011). This text, begun at Harvard’s Project Zero, is a collection of thinking routines to allow students to express, document, and reflect upon different viewpoints. These thinking routines, used over the course of multiple contexts, can help students understand and internalize the moves of academic conversation and writing.

I left the the advanced institute armed with goals for specific changes. In the hopes of having my students engage in argument thinking more regularly, I set a goal for myself to have at least a week’s worth of “Writing into the Day” each month of the school year,

for a total of nine opportunities to create nuanced arguments. I reasoned that nine argument-with-source-integration opportunities was much more than the one argument-with-source-integration I had previously offered. In the hopes of scaffolding to writing with discussion, I set a goal to use thinking routines in conjunction with these exercises. Not wanting to take on too much, I decided to focus on regularly implementing three thinking routines into discussion throughout the course of the year.

For the 2016-2017 school year, I decided to focus on my three sections of English 9ACC. This grade-level class is a requirement for graduation, and students of all ability levels can self-select to take this class. Our school is a union district, so English 9ACC has the task of helping those from predominantly three feeder districts plus smaller private schools transition to high school expectations. At the time, the English 9ACC curriculum was organized primarily as a genre study, meaning that argument was one isolated genre. I gave the students multiple opportunities to create arguments by inserting “Writing into the Day” and thinking routines as openers within the class and then continued with the agreed-upon curriculum.

I began by having them respond to text using the “they say/I say” routine (Graff & Birkenstein 2014). Before they could offer their opinions, they first would have to summarize the text. Initially, I was particular about students using the sentence stem (“the author said _____, and I say _____”). If anyone offered an opinion without positioning it in relation to the text, I would redirect to the routine (“they said....you say...”). As they became more confident in positioning their ideas in relation to the text, I began to encourage them to position their ideas in relation to their peers in class. This shift allowed for more practice using this thinking routine and increased individual accountability.

To encourage students to use evidence to support their thinking, I used the thinking routine introduced in *Making Thinking Visible*: “what did you see which made you say that?” (p. 165). Whenever anyone would make a claim, I would redirect to the text with the question “what did you see which made you say that?” This question acted as an

invitation for students to go back into the text for evidence. The wording of this prompt is particularly important, for the authors discuss how other ways of framing the question, like “show me your evidence,” can come off as accusatory. The wording of this routine assumes that students had a reason for thinking what they did and invites them to make their thinking “visible” for their audience.

As students became more adept at situating their ideas in light of an ongoing conversation and supporting their ideas with text evidence, I then wanted them to consider multiple perspectives. Ritchhart, Church, and Morrison offered another routine: “Circle of Perspectives.” To do this routine, they generally needed to have read at least two sources on the same topic. First, as a class, we brainstormed “voices” that were part of the topic, then they chose a “voice” in which to answer three questions:

1. I am thinking about _____ from the perspective of _____.
2. I think _____.
3. A question I have is _____.

Students can repeat this routine for multiple voices of a topic to give them a deeper understanding of the parts of the conversation. After participating in the reading, discussing, and writing about these topics, they would be ready to begin a larger writing assignment.

School Start Time: A Case Study

To introduce the concept of routine argument writing (“Writing into the Day”), I began with an approachable topic: school start time. This text set includes three readings, and students wrote in response to the topic in class at the end of that week. They were

assessed on their ability to create a nuanced claim, support their claim with evidence from multiple texts, and offer and respond to a perspective that differs from their own.

On Monday, they responded to the question “Do you believe that Nicolet should continue to start at its current time? Why or why not?” They had five minutes to write in their writer’s notebook to begin, then shared their ideas in small groups. In whole group, a participant from each table was asked to position his or her idea in light of someone else’s they’d heard (“I heard [this person] say _____, and I say _____”). At the end of fifteen minutes, we closed this exercise for the day and moved onto the regularly scheduled lesson.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, the students read texts one (Kalish, 2008) and two (elenam112, n.d.). After they finished, they wrote for five minutes in their notebooks to one or both of the following questions: what is the main topic? What would you like to know more about? In whole group, they shared out either the main topic or a question they had. As they shared, I prompted them to reference the text from the day with the prompt “what did you see which made you say that.” At the end of fifteen minutes, I asked them to take two minutes to write in their writer’s notebook about a new idea they’d heard or a new question they had in response to the text.

On Thursday, they read text three (“High Schools with Late Start Times,” 2013). After they finished reading, I led them through the “Circle of Viewpoints” routine. First, I prompted them to brainstorm a list of all of the voices included in the school start time conversation, then to select one voice to answer the Circle of Viewpoints questions. In whole group, they were invited to share how their voice would respond to the topic of school start time. Finally, I set a seven minute timer for them to respond to the prompt: “I used to think...now I think,” and they individually wrote in their notebook about how their thinking had changed.

On Friday, they were given the opportunity to compose an extended response to Monday’s question. Only this time, they were asked to cite information from at least two of their sources from the week. Alternately, this assignment could be given as a homework assignment.

Outcomes

Throughout the school year, I ended up offering a total of four opportunities to create extended arguments using nonfiction source material with the Writing into the Day protocol (introduced with the “School Start Time” text set). For these writing assignments, I measured the ability to create a nuanced claim, support that claim with evidence from multiple texts, and introduce and respond to a perspective that differs from their own. I measured beginning of the year and end of the year proficiencies for my 2016-2017 freshmen.

In my freshmen cohort, the number of students able to create a nuanced claim grew by 61%. In the September administration of this writing protocol, 18 out of 62 students (29%) were able to create a nuanced claim independently. In the May administration of this writing protocol, 56 out of 62 students (90%) were able to create a nuanced claim independently.

In the same cohort, the number of students able to integrate evidence from at least two resources grew by 54%. In the September administration of this writing protocol, 25 out of 62 students (40%) were able to use evidence from at least two texts to support their thinking. In the May administration of this writing protocol, 58 out of 62 students (94%) were able to use evidence from at least two texts to support their thinking.

While this growth was phenomenal, I saw the most growth in students’ ability to account for multiple perspectives over the course of the school year. In the September administration of this writing protocol, 3 out of 62 students (4%) were able to introduce and respond to a perspective different from their own. In the May administration of this writing protocol, 53 out of 62 students (84%) were able to introduce and respond to a perspective different from their own.

The growth I observed in student writing makes sense given the anecdotal information I saw over the course of class discussion. Students gained comfort with the protocols of the thinking routines. After reading and observing individually, they were eager to participate in class discussions. I would set the timer, elect a discussion starter, and

Concluding Thoughts

The implementation of these routines did not come without challenges because it can be difficult to stick to the wording of the thinking routines. I found myself needing to empty my mind as I prompted students with just the prompts, being especially careful not to value one student statement over another. At times, discussion would falter as kids were unsure of how to connect their ideas to either the text or the ongoing conversation. Allowing wait time was tough!

However, I found that they were often more uncomfortable with the wait time than I was. Once someone spoke, even if it didn't reference evidence or acknowledge a stakeholder, we would be able to restart discussion. Building stamina for writing was also difficult for them. Initially, some would struggle with how to respond to the prompt with sources. When this happened, I would try to have them orally summarize their thinking: how would they answer the question? What sources did they see which made them say that? As they laid out their argument, I would handwrite the ideas on paper for them. After they finished, they had created an "outline" with me as a scribe. Eventually, by giving fidelity to this monthly routine, every student was able to respond in writing. Finally, the mental shift into routine argument writing was a tough one to make because I felt a lot of pressure to adhere to curriculum calendars! When this happened, I reminded myself of the stakes: every student needs to be college, career, and community ready to critically engage in respectful discussion. I was helping them gain that skill set, even if the calendar felt daunting.

At times I would feel overwhelmed with the challenges. But as the year went on, the students gained footing with the discussion routines and writing process. During the last couple of cycles of Writing into the Day for the school year, I'd turn students over to their writing at the end of the week. And rather than have them look confused or unsure of where to start, something new happened. Confident and empowered, they started writing--the whole point.

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