

Teaching Informed Argument for Solution-Oriented Citizenship

ELA classrooms are uniquely positioned to teach students the value of informed citizenship and compelling argument.

Recently, one of my students asked her peers in conversation, “Why is it that when I vent on Facebook about my frustrations with our school’s dress code, everyone else thinks they need to chime in with what they think?” There was a pause at the table. Then another student said, “Um, because it’s Facebook?” I chuckled when I heard that from across the classroom. But the exchange also revealed something about this social media culture to which my students and I belong. Much of what is shared on social media is biased rant or toxic vitriol about problems, real and imagined. Seldom do we find helpful solutions to society’s complex issues in our social media feeds.

Like my students, I belong to a social media culture that keeps me connected with friends and family where we share photos of each other, our travels, and the goofy things we do. But there’s another side to that culture where memes and opinion-driven posts present points of view that are not always supported by credible evidence. The algorithms behind social media platforms can push us into camps where we become surrounded by only those with whom we agree, creating an us versus them dynamic that drives us further apart (Hess). Fittingly, the contemporary commonplace definition of argument involves angry people shaking their fists at one another.

These are complex times when it comes to the literacy skills demanded of students. Responsible instruction teaches students to navigate digital news and social media spaces that barrage and

overwhelm many of them. In truth, it overwhelms many adults. But ELA classrooms are uniquely positioned to curtail this trend by teaching students the value of informed citizenship and compelling argument. This understanding of argument writing as part and parcel of citizenship conceptualizes argument as a set of “social practices” (Newell et al. 1) where students inquire, build knowledge, develop a claim, perhaps change their minds, and ultimately choose to deliberate with others about a mutual issue or concern.

Traditional classroom approaches to persuasive writing that emphasize *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* may exacerbate the problem by ignoring whether evidence supports the student’s position or whether the student can evaluate the credibility of that evidence. Instead, students are often encouraged to persuade us with emotion, force, and conviction that their opinions are to be believed. Traditional practices also seem fixated on pro-con debates and writing prompts that push students into binary understandings of how arguments function. Well-reasoned arguments and credible evidence are necessary for an informed democracy, and experience sorting through multiple perspectives is necessary to make sense of the complex world.

When students experience a solution-oriented culture in the classroom, they learn important critical literacy lessons, in both their reading and their writing. Our classrooms can provide experience solving problems students care about, so that students know, no matter who they are or where they’re from, their voices matter. Students need to

know that their reason and their spirit can solve the seemingly unsolvable (Kennedy). Our classrooms are the real world. When we acknowledge this fact, we communicate that we respect and honor each student's place in that world. That acknowledgment is distinctly important in communities where students feel isolated from spheres of influence and political power.

A well-rounded education must provide genuine learning opportunities that teach students to curate their own sources of information, find solutions to the issues they encounter in that information, and make compelling arguments for those solutions. To create these opportunities, students must develop understandings and skills that change the way they experience the conversations that surround them.

Routine Practice

The National Writing Project (NWP) recently developed the College, Career and Community Writers Program (or C3WP), an approach to teaching source-based argument writing in grades 6–12. Teachers use and adapt instructional materials and formative assessments, supported by NWP teacher-leaders in professional development. C3WP materials consist of routine practices, skill-focused units, and longer extended projects. In an independent study of the program by SRI International, students who received C3WP argument instruction “demonstrated greater proficiency in the quality of reasoning and use of evidence in their writing” (Gallagher et al.).

Routine argument writing, an important C3WP instructional approach, develops the way students think, listen, and react through regular informal practices. My students routinely engage in *arguments at a glance* where they quickly consider and discuss controversies. Early in the school year, students write in response to images, working from simple controversies toward more complex issues. For instance, students may begin with an image from Google that shows a Toronto funeral home billboard with

the words “Text & Drive” in large print and the funeral home’s name beneath it. Students take 30 seconds to read that image and write down their reactions to it: *What’s the issue here? What’s your position?* The image can be placed into a slideshow with three additional images and arranged so they increase in complexity from one image to the next. The next slide may show a sign outside a small-town mayor’s office that reads, “ENGLISH IS OUR LANGUAGE, LEARN IT, NO EXCETIONS [sic].” With each new image in the slideshow, the instructions are repeated. After two to three minutes of viewing images and writing, students place a star next to the written reaction they feel most strongly about, then share what they’ve written with peers.

Some students come from homes where opinions are shared freely and often without much consideration for other perspectives. Some prefer to avoid conflict altogether. For others, complex issues leave them wondering where to begin making sense of problems and solutions. Routine arguments help students listen to each other, sort through the perspectives and the evidence, and move beyond whatever walls they bring with them to class. Arguments at a glance provide opportunities to share thinking as it develops and cultivate a generosity for others.

Students also copy quotes in their notebooks from argument scholars such as Donald Lazere, Joseph Harris, and Deborah Tannen to insert concepts of generosity into our routine conversations. Lazere suggests you should “[a]lways acknowledge, and speak to as sympathetically as fairness requires, the position opposed to yours. You will never persuade anyone who doesn’t already agree with you if you stack the deck by presenting only arguments in support of your own position, while ignoring and distorting arguments on the other side” (130). Harris teaches to “come to terms” with all perspectives, including those with whom we disagree (13), while Tannen says that “[o]ften the truth is in the complex middle, not the oversimplified extremes” (10). These three examples work well with Kenneth Burke’s parlor metaphor where “[y]ou listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar” (110–11). Scholarly perspectives like these shape students’ literacy by teaching them to become

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informed about the complexities of an issue before they formally take a position.

Online news sites, local newspapers, and social media feeds supply classrooms with a never-ending stream of topics. By including recent national and local news texts, classroom content stays current and engaging. If the news is talking about Pokemon Go, we should read, write, and talk about Pokemon Go. If journalists dig into fake news stories, we should dig into those too. Students can experience routine argument in timed stretches, which allows the teacher to start a class period with argument and then shift to other areas of ELA content. Sometimes full class periods can be dedicated to especially rich discussions.

Students' notebooks collect their responses to routine argument activities. They record questions there and write to answer them. Some class periods begin with students writing down definitions for critical words such as *opinion*, *argument*, *claim*, *evidence*, *confirmation bias*, *primary certitude*, *ethnocentrism*, and *committed relativism*. This vocabulary anchors students in the language of argument, enabling them to connect to what they read previously and internalize the concepts for use in future conversations.

These discussions help define what argument is and where we find controversies in our everyday lives. "Argument is everywhere," we should tell them. "We just need to look for it." As the year progresses, students slow down when they encounter controversy. They set aside emotions and become more observant and discerning. They think, listen, and react differently. Each discussion exposes

students to the multiple perspectives in the classroom. Disagreement happens and opinions are shared; but they begin to question each other's evidence and reasoning. They embrace the vocabulary of argument and settle conflicts through discussions about evidence. The argument culture develops beyond notions of winning or losing. The reasoned analysis of evidence is where everyone wins. That's where nuanced solutions that benefit the common good emerge from the complexity.

Getting Informed

Actively reading a text requires that the reader joins that text's conversation. Annotation is an essential skill for students to learn for them to join that conversation. As students record their observations and questions in the margins of the text, they are engaging in a dialogue where claims, evidence, and reasoning surface. The notes jotted in the margins carry the class discussions that follow, as students hold their marked texts when sharing what they have read with peers. Expectedly, students disagree, but the notes point them back to the textual evidence to support their claims and reasoning. This approach works in small-group discussions, Socratic circles, and larger open discussions, providing students the early steps in finding evidence to support what they say, first in discussion and later in writing.

Early in the school year, the teacher selects texts to be read in class, often from mainstream news articles. As that classroom culture develops, a transition happens in the first nine weeks to a set of multiple texts around a single issue or topic. In constructing text sets for students, teachers should represent three or more perspectives surrounding every issue students discuss together. The *New York Times* "Room for Debate" series, for instance, is a great resource and provides rich arguments from multiple credible perspectives. Significant growth occurs when students read with generosity from perspectives that stand in opposition to their own. "Coming to terms" is the act of understanding a text on its own terms, considering both its uses and its limitations (Harris 13). If students are to make sense of a complex world, it's important they comprehend issues beyond binary (or two-sided) arguments. The learning from these experiences carries into extended research projects at the end of the

year where students curate their sources to represent multiple perspectives, come to terms with each, and identify possible solutions.

Reading multiple perspectives presents students the occasion to address their confirmation biases. We all have biases that affect our judgments and decisions. Certainly it is true that not all of these biases are bad. Most of us have biases that we do not care to give up because those biases reflect what we value. But as we encounter arguments online and in the news, confirmation bias can cause us to either accept or reject evidence depending on whether it squares with what we already believe. Today's online culture thrives on confirmation bias to the point where users often like or share social media posts they have not read because the headlines match their previously held beliefs (Dewey). The demand for complex literacy skills requires that we not permit our confirmation biases to run unchecked.

To address skepticism regarding the media in the 2017 school year, we read BuzzFeed's October 2016 article that reported findings about the truth-

fulness of hyper-partisan news posts. The article included images and graphs students could annotate as well. Classroom discussions followed on how BuzzFeed might have determined whether information in the posts was true or false and how mainstream sources such as Politico, which shared factual information over 98 percent of the time during the

Buzzfeed investigation, have fewer Facebook followers and fewer shares than hyper-partisan sources (Silverman et al.).

When students consider statistics in studies, surveys, and graphs, they engage with data that can, on one hand, provide them with evidence to support what they believe, but can also cause them to shift their stance as they analyze the numbers. They can shift in multiple directions and enter an inquiry state where their questions lead them to deep reflection on previous opinions.

Students became interested in the hyper-partisan sources of information in their own Facebook feeds and the misinformation lurking there. I asked students to take out their cell phones and

scan for political posts in their Facebook feeds. We projected the Snopes website on the board and researched the claims in posts students encountered. Each post generated new discussions on posts they had seen recently and the family members who had posted them. Students began following Snopes on Facebook and Twitter, which put them in position to share Snopes research to quell the spread of fake news within their circles of influence while keeping themselves informed. One student noted that it was helpful regardless of whether the reader was liberal or conservative. It's important to note that this is not an activity to undertake at the beginning of the school year. The argument culture grows toward moments like this.

As presidential tweetstorms assailed the media and protests turned violent around the country, students made diverse arguments as to what they thought the Founding Fathers would think of American democracy today. In response, we conducted a close reading of Thomas Jefferson's 1787 letter to Edward Carrington in which Jefferson writes,

The way to prevent these irregular interpositions of the people is to give them full information of their affairs thro' the channel of the public papers, and to contrive that those papers should penetrate the whole mass of the people. The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.

Jefferson also makes an argument for critical literacy education in the next sentence: "But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them." Some students thought Jefferson was arguing that all citizens should be able to read. But a dynamic classroom discussion ensued regarding the levels of meaning in that sentence, including the need for informed citizens who possess the ability to evaluate information and act.

An ELA teacher can positively affect a student's ability to gather information and support the student's evaluation of that information by providing space in the curriculum and the lessons necessary to do it. If we desire a generation of informed and empowered young people, our approaches to

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teaching research and the curation of sources should lead us to that outcome.

Audience and Purpose

Informed discussions about complex issues equip students with high-leverage life skills and empower them with models of cognitive living that contribute to a strong democracy. We must provide students pathways to do something with the information they gather beyond the assignment required for the grade. Through the culture of argument, students write informed and compelling arguments for audiences beyond the teacher with the intent to be heard or cause change. Traditional approaches to student writing, which often assign students to write for an imaginary audience or for their teacher, seldom allow the writing to influence anyone outside the classroom walls. To honor the complex thinking students achieve in a solution-oriented argument culture, information should lead to knowledge, and knowledge should lead to action.

In the rural community where I teach, I have found that researching local issues helps

students see tangible results to their participation in solution-based argument culture. Students spend several weeks reading from local newspapers. They list the issues they find in their notebooks, adding issues they read on their Facebook feeds and hear around the dinner table at home. All they've learned within the argument culture serves them now. They discuss these topics with their peers, which builds energy around a single topic. They write at length outlining their claims and stance. It's important that students are aware of their initial stance so they can monitor the positional shifts they make as they encounter each new perspective or piece of information.

Recent student projects have researched dangerous conditions on rural roads, our local museum's lack of funding, and the need for safe crosswalks around our school buildings. Depending on the issue, students interviewed school administrators, county administrators, museum directors, pastors, the county health nurse, or the local judge. The chemistry teacher taught them about magnesium chloride. The agriculture teacher taught them how to read section, range, and township maps,



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and the superintendent argued school policies with them. They joined forces with the school resource officer to measure the crosswalks around the school

and studied laws related to the topic. They gathered student risk-behavior data from the counselor and searched for articles and studies from credible sources online. They sent emails to state officials and surveyed community members on a variety of problems and solutions using a Google Form posted on community Facebook groups. They huddled around tables and analyzed the graphs and raw data from those surveys. It was a messy process with research

papers that were just as messy, but the students came to own that process. Sometimes they changed their minds by the end of the paper.

But they were informed.

When it came time to write opinion-editorial letters, they readily made claims and selected evidence from their research. They crafted compelling lines of reasoning that anticipated and generously respected counterarguments. They sent their op-ed letters to the local newspaper and the school board. For three weeks each summer, the newspaper printed the student letters, successfully informing our community on dozens of local issues. Their writing also positively transformed multiple school policies and practices. Letters from grateful county residents arrived at the school answering the students' letters.

A sophomore student named Colton wanted to address the need for advanced life support (ALS) services through our town's ambulance service. His father was the local fire chief and spoke to Colton about the issue frequently. The fire department was paying for ALS services through grant funding that would run out soon. The county needed to provide funding to continue the service. Colton visited the county courthouse and found that the rural communities outside of city limits were comprised of an aging population. He reasoned that ALS service was a critical need to that population. He interviewed ambulance and hospital staff, and he called

fire chiefs in the surrounding counties to gain insight into how other rural communities were addressing this problem. In his letter to the editor, Colton wrote that


[t]axpayers should have the opportunity to vote for the creation of this ambulance district because the ambulance needs funding to pay for the life-saving level of care it is currently providing with national grant money. Grant money will not last forever. But if we can pull together a few extra dollars a year, then the paramedics will be able to provide ALS care to people in our community. And who knows? It might even save your life some day (Cowger 4).

After Colton's letter was published, a local emergency physician joined the fire chief in lobbying the county commissioners to put the issue on a ballot for residents to consider. While the commissioners were initially hesitant to raise taxes, the movement gained support and, nearly two years later, the ballot measure passed "overwhelmingly" with 75 percent of voters in favor of funding the ALS services with local tax money (Pronovost 1).

Trinity, another sophomore, was concerned about suicide rates in Montana, and she was surprised when her research found that Montana ranked among the worst in the country for the past 40 years. She wanted to change that. When she interviewed teachers, she was surprised that many didn't remember ever learning the warning signs or how to intervene. She wrote a letter to the county newspaper where she presented her evidence and argued that "[s]uicide is a huge epidemic that can be eliminated if everyone knows how to stop it, where to go for help, and how to notice the warning signs" (Coddington 5). The next fall, all school staff members—including teachers, administrators, aides, secretaries, cooks, and bus drivers—took part in suicide prevention training on the first day of school because Trinity published a reasoned letter making the case for that action.

Solution-oriented citizenship is the cornerstone of a well-rounded education. While some may argue that we are trying to equip students to be thoughtful, ethical communicators and citizens in a time when the larger culture doesn't seem to share the same values, we should remember that we as ELA educators teach the population that becomes that larger culture. Our contributions to the

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civic engagement of this generation will change what it means to be truly literate beyond any tradition, fad, or mandate to which we might be compelled to teach. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Students learn about the purposes and techniques of annotation by examining text closely and critically. They study sample annotations and identify the purposes annotation can serve. Students then practice annotation through a careful reading of a story excerpt, using specific guidelines and writing as many annotations as possible. Students then work in pairs to peer review their annotations, practice using footnotes and PowerPoint to present annotations, and reflect on how creating annotations can change a reader's perspective through personal connection with text. <http://bit.ly/1ldNS41>

2018 CEL Annual Convention Call for Proposals

"CELebrating the Vision, Voice, and Momentum of Leadership"

Houston, Texas, November 18–19, 2018

Leadership is the intangible force we use to create meaningful change, but the long-term sustainability of any change rests in the active pursuit of innovation—innovation as a result of forward thinking and deliberate reflection. Whether you are a department chair, lead teacher, instructional coach, curriculum supervisor, or administrator, the CEL Program Committee invites literacy educators at the elementary, middle, secondary, and higher education levels to submit a proposal that addresses the theme.

The proposal form is available on the CEL website at <http://www.ncte.org/cel/convention> and must be submitted by April 15, 2018.