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Beyond Proving It: How C3WP Helps Students Write Nuanced Arguments and Purposeful Commentary

KRISTIN E. SMITH

My Path to C3WP

I was working my way through reading and responding to a stack of twelfth grade informational essays when something dawned on me. In my seven years of teaching in three completely different school environments (from an urban charter school to a suburban alternative school to a traditional urban high school), I had worked with hundreds of diverse students on all different types of writing, and this day I noticed, once again, the same trend in these essays that I had observed so many times before: My students struggled with using evidence from outside sources in their own writing.

In particular, my students struggled with connecting the evidence they had chosen to their stated claims, with paraphrasing from their sources, with using signal phrases to make it clear where they were using their own ideas as opposed to ideas from sources, and with using in-text citations.

When I realized that these same issues in student writing exist in many different schools and communities that follow different curricula and serve students of different backgrounds, I knew that I needed to take another look at what I had been doing. Like many school curricula across the country, the curriculum I had been asked to follow required students to write in each of the three main genres identified in the Common Core (argumentative, informational, and narrative) at least once during the school year. Typically, at each of the different schools in which I taught, students were expected to write an average of two literary or rhetorical analysis essays (usually categorized as "argument"), one informational research paper (often co-mingled with some argument, such as a problem-solution essay), and one or two narratives (e.g., a personal narrative and a poetry project). They were also expected to write routinely in the form of journal writing prompts to open a lesson or quick writes during a lesson. After taking a look at a typical year's worth of writing curriculum in my classes and at my schools, it was clear that students were writing quite a bit.

Then I thought about how students had been engaging with and using sources in each of those typical units. By "engaging with," I mean what they were actually asked to do with each text or source that they encountered. In a literary analysis essay, for example, students most often engaged with one or two sources in the form of the novels, stories, or poems the whole class read. I noticed that when students engaged with sources for this type of writing, they were usually frantically combing through the text looking for evidence to support their claim. For an informational essay in my class, students usually engaged with sources by taking notes from several texts (the minimum that I required), by copying down quotes that they might use, and by recording bibliographic information to use on their works cited page. For most narrative writing projects in my class, students did not need to use any sources at all.

At the beginning of this school year, I asked my students to think about why teachers might ask them to use sources when they write. One student said they use sources "so that they are not called out for plagiarism," and another said "so they know where students get their information and that it is credible and not stolen directly." They did not see sources as tools to help them enter a conversation about a topic or to help build their arguments. Instead, their main concerns when working with evidence were to avoid plagiarism and to demonstrate credibility.

Despite all of the writing they were doing, I realized that my students over the years did not have much structured practice in reading, annotating, and discussing sources to analyze the author's claims, evidence, or biases. They had only a few opportunities each year to practice integrating source material in their own writing, most of which limited them to

one or two sources, and each of those resulted in a summative assessment of some kind.

With such little, infrequent practice, it was no wonder that students were struggling with these skills, and even with seeing why they might want to use evidence from sources in their writing. The school where I was teaching when I came to this realization had a strong emphasis on college preparation. I knew approximately 90% of my students would go on to college the very next fall, and I felt as if they would struggle with the writing expectations that awaited them there. Moreover, the 2016 election was just behind us, and I also felt as if my students were ill-prepared to deal with the deluge of news stories and claims of fake news. Then I wondered, what would happen if my students were able to engage with sources more regularly throughout the school year? What if they could read, annotate, and discuss a wider variety of texts more frequently? What if they practiced using evidence from texts in their own writing more than three or four times a year, and what if I assessed their skills formatively on a regular basis?

I was trying to figure out just how to do that when I got a fortuitous email from Bill Tucker of the Eastern Michigan Writing Project. The College, Career, and Community Writers Program (C3WP), formerly called the College-Ready Writers Program, was recruiting for its second cohort. According to Bill, it was "a research-validated program developed by the National Writing Project to help students become skilled at writing arguments from non-fiction sources" (personal communication, April 12, 2017). It sounded like exactly what I was looking for, and I signed up to join the new cohort.

Joining C3WP gave me the tools I needed not only to teach argument more effectively, but also to help students think more critically about sources and claims. I think what has been absolutely critical for my students has been the increased frequency with which they write arguments from sources. Before I joined the C3WP cohort, students were writing from sources maybe three to four times per year in assignments that doubled as summative assessments. Since I joined the cohort, I have not replaced my old curriculum with the C3WP mini units, but rather have incorporated them alongside what I was doing before. That means that, in addition to those same assignments, they write two to three additional arguments using the C3WP mini units *each semester.*

By the end of the first semester, my students have completed three C3WP mini-units, as well as a literary analysis essay. That means that, in fewer than twenty weeks, they have had four opportunities to practice making claims and integrating evidence from texts to support those claims. The changes in the way my students engage with sources and use them in their writing have been profound.

C3WP in my Classroom

Nuanced, Debatable, Defensible Claims

I introduced my students to C3WP at the beginning of the year with a mini-unit called "Writing into the Day." The "Writing into the Day" mini-unit helped to familiarize students with the key routines of C3WP, such as writing and revising claims recursively, by reading articles with different claims on the same topic, and writing reflectively about those articles. After reading and writing about three different articles, my students then wrote an informal argument of their own. For the three mini-units I did with my students in the first semester, I called their argument pieces informal because the students wrote one draft; they were allowed and even encouraged to use first-person pronouns and to explore their thinking, and they were assessed formatively rather than summatively.

The text set I chose for "Writing into the Day" was Jennifer Ringo's (2016) "Unplugged," which was about the role screens play in our lives. I loved using this topic at the beginning of the school year because, in addition to introducing the C3WP routines, it helped us talk about classroom norms for cell phones. Students read about the ways that cell phones can help them, as well as some of the downsides to having them in the classroom and in our lives.

As part of this mini-unit, I also used a supplementary C3WP resource called "Writing Claims" (Wolph, 2018) to introduce students to nuanced, debatable, defensible claims. Then, students practiced writing claims recursively to get to a final claim. Using the "Writing into the Day" protocol, students read one article on the first day, and then wrote what they were thinking about the topic after reading that source. On the second day, they read another article with an opposing viewpoint. Again, they wrote about what they were thinking after reading. On the third day, they read a third article that looked at the topic from another angle. Finally, they wrote their own claims and built short, informal arguments to support them.

Many of my students' final claims on the topic were nuanced and much more complex than the typical one-dimensional, pro-con claims that I used to see in argumentative essays. For example, Christina wrote, "Cell phones are used in an addictive way, and will become an obsession if you al-

low it." She left room for nuance with the clause *"if you allow it,"* implying that her claim is not always the case, and that people could use cell phones without becoming obsessed.

Emma's claim seemed more one-sided at first. She wrote, "Cell phones are affecting our everyday lives for the worse." In the body of the argument, she wrote about how they affect cognitive function and about how they cause people to miss out on socializing. However, she added nuance in her conclusion by addressing several of the positive things that cell phones do for us, "like improving education, buying things, and to communicate" as long as they weren't being used for "pointless" purposes like "games and other apps."

Alanna's nuance came from adding limitations to the use of phones rather than restricting them completely. She wrote, "Children between certain ages should be limited on screen time because if they are not put in the opportunity to go outside and play and see friends, it can damage or prevent social skills."

Benedict, too, noted the importance of limits. He wrote, "Technology is good in moderation but shouldn't become an obsessive part of our lives." Writing claims recursively after reading sources from different perspectives and angles helped my students to write nuanced arguments rather than simple pro or con essays.

The Harris Moves to Help Students Do More Than "Prove It"

About a month later, we worked on the C3WP "Writing and Revising Claims" mini-unit. We reviewed the concept of writing nuanced, debatable, defensible claims, and students read and wrote about the role video games should play in adolescents' lives. When we started the second argument mini-unit, my classes were excited about it. A few of my 10th grade students actually said "Yay!"

I put the writing prompt on the board, which was to write about any thoughts, feelings, or experiences related to the words "video games" for five minutes. My students in both classes wrote silently. The only sound was the scratching of their pens and pencils. Even my students who are usually most resistant to writing were intensely focused. I think it was because those particular students play video games a lot, and so they were really interested in the topic.

Then, I had them turn and talk to each other about what they wrote when the time was up. I walked around and their discussions were all on topic, and they were adding to and building on each other's ideas. Then one person from each partner group reported out about their discussions for the whole class, and I shared what I wrote about video games playing a big role in my life from childhood through the present.

Students got out Chromebooks after the discussion, and they opened up an infographic (The Neurology of Gaming, 2012) about how playing video games affects different parts of the brain. They studied the infographic and contributed to a See-Think-Wonder thinking routine (Project Zero, 2016) using Padlet. Here is some of what they came up with:

See	Think	Wonder
• It talks about the positives and negatives of video games on people. Generally, it says that more violent games cause negative tendencies, but other games can help with teamwork. • games can improve peripheral vision, way-finding skills, hand-eye coordination and mental rotation ;) • Video Games have positive and negative effects on the brain. Playing more violent games frequently can cause anxiety. It can improve teamwork, and hand-eye coordination.	• That its accurate and does have some goods to go with the negatives • i still think its bad but not as bad as i do know i never realized how much stronger it can make the brain in the long run • I think that video games are positive in doses. If you play them all the time they can have severe effects on your brain.	• They constantly talk about violent games cause violent behavior; how much do you have to play to become more noticeably aggressive? • how did they do all of this research? • Where are the credits and where is the information from? Evidence?

Figure 1: See-Think-Wonder.

Figure 1 shows students' initial thinking about the video games infographic. I was most excited about what I saw in the Wonder column. Students were starting to question the evidence they were looking at. "How much do you have to play to become noticeably more aggressive?" "How did they do all of this research?" Two people even asked what sources they used to make this infographic. I heard even more of these types of comments in their conversations about the infographic as I was walking around. Because the infographic showed a range of effects for video game use, students were questioning the research on both sides of the issue.

Before we started the C3WP mini-units, most students did not mention the credibility of sources in their arguments. Most didn't question anything at all. They either summarized some of the evidence, or they used it primarily to illustrate their claims. Now, at the beginning of our second C3WP mini-unit, they were writing thoughtful questions and thinking about credibility.

Not only were students questioning the evidence in our in-class and online discussions, but they were doing it in their writing, too. Benedict chose to juxtapose two different points of view in order to support his claim that people should "Use video games wisely. Don't get rid of them, just be careful with

them." In his first body paragraph, he referenced two articles: an editorial from the *New York Times* titled "Video Games Aren't Addictive" and another from CNN called "When Video Games Become an Addiction." He used evidence from the former to counter the latter:

> According to Ferguson and Markey of the *New York Times*, playing a video game releases as much dopamine as eating a slice of pizza. In contrast, doing a drug such as Methamphetamine releases ten times as much dopamine as video games. So news articles that say video games are just as addictive are flat out wrong.

In her informal argument, Amanda argued that "video games may be used as a coping mechanism. Or, a way to relax after a long, rough day." She referenced the article "When Video Games Become Addictive" that argued that people can become addicted to video games. She pushed back against that idea in a more nuanced way, stating, "I also see...where it can start to be an unhealthy coping mechanism, where you shut everyone out and only focus on that thing. But, that can happen with anything or anyone." She selected evidence that ran counter to her claim so that she could identify a weakness in the other side's line of thinking, but she did not completely discount it. Harris (2006) notes that "to counter is not to nullify, but to suggest a different way of thinking. Its defining phrases are *On the other hand… and Yes, but…*" (p. 56). Amanda was countering in just that way in her writing after only two of the C3WP mini-units.

It's important to note that I had not specifically taught students to counter in their arguments yet in the school year. I had not mentioned different ways to use evidence at all when students were working on the second mini-unit. These students were countering and questioning the evidence on their own both in discussions and in writing in a way that they hadn't before C3WP. Layering reading and writing about articles with different viewpoints and angles seemed to encourage students to question and push back against the evidence without directly being instructed to do so.

Toward the end of the first semester, just a couple of weeks after their video game arguments, my students worked with the C3WP "Connecting Evidence to Claims" mini-unit. The text set for this mini-unit focused on social media and how it affects our lives. During this mini-unit, I formally introduced four writing moves, called the "Harris Moves" in C3WP materials, from Joseph Harris's *Rewriting* (2006). These moves represent different ways that writers can use evidence from sources in their own argument writing. Early on in his book, Harris (2006) defines the three forwarding moves as:

- **Illustrating:** When you look to other texts for examples of a point you want to make.
- **Authorizing:** When you invoke the expertise or status of another writer to support your thinking.
- **Extending:** When you put your own spin on the terms or concepts that you take from other texts (p. 39)

In a later chapter, Harris (2006) introduces the fourth move: countering. He defines countering as bringing "a different set of interests to bear upon a subject," looking "to notice what others have not. Your aim is not to refute what has been said before, to bring the discussion to an end, but to respond to prior views in ways that move the conversation in new directions" (p. 56). In the C3WP supplementary resource "The Argument Highway," Leanne Bordelon (2016) puts this in simpler terms, describing countering as "noting the limits of a text; uncovering a new line of thinking."

This mini-unit also introduced students to the "Connecting Evidence to Claim" planner, a graphic organizer available in the mini-unit of the same name (NWP, 2018). Students wrote their claim at the top of a page of the planner. Then, they identified the purpose of that particular paragraph. They chose two pieces of evidence to support that purpose and recorded them on the planner, added a signal phrase, and then wrote commentary to show how those pieces of evidence supported their purpose and connected to their claim.

Connecting Evidence to Claim Planner

Claim: ____________________

Purpose of Paragraph:	
Evidence from a Source • Select information: quote or paraphrase • Add a signal phrase	***Why is this evidence important?*** • Write commentary to explain why the evidence is important and how it connects to the claim. • Use sentence frames to jumpstart or stretch your thinking.
1.	
2.	

Use the back for additional evidence in this paragraph.

Figure 2. Connecting Evidence to Claim Planner

Figure 2 illustrates the planner available in the C3WP mini-unit called "Connecting Evidence to Claim." After reading four articles about social media and completing the "Connecting Evidence to Claims" planner, students wrote their third informal argument. This time, I asked them to aim for at least four paragraphs and to use at least two pieces

of evidence from the sources we read as a class. I did not require them to use any of the Harris moves in particular, so I was curious to see how or if these moves would come through in their writing.

In addition to illustrating, which many students had been doing all along, most of my students used at least one other Harris move in their social media arguments. In Benedict's first informal argument, before we did any of the C3WP mini units, he used source material to illustrate his claim, but he did not cite his sources or even make it clear to the reader where he was using information from a source rather than his own ideas. In Benedict's informal argument for the third mini-unit, he used evidence from two different sources to illustrate and authorize his claim, and he also used commentary to extend the evidence he selected. He explained that one source came from "a developmental psychologist and media research for UCLA," while another was from "Jobvite's 2013 social recruiting survey" to authorize the points he was making. After summarizing the information from the Jobvite survey that showed how recruiters reacted to different types of social media posts, he extended the data to make a point of his own: "This shows that social media can heavily influence your future based on the choices you make on the platform."

Amanda, who had primarily used evidence to illustrate and authorize her claims in past arguments, also used commentary to extend the data she included in her argument for this mini-unit:

> 93% of recruiters admit to reviewing online presence as part of the screening process the article **How Social Media Privacy Settings Could Affect Your Future** states. Some people could view this in a negative way, but it's a good way to make you think about your future...This should also make any younger person who has a social media account think about the long run.

Using evidence only to illustrate a claim often leads to argumentative essays that aim to prove one side or another. In learning to authorize, extend, and counter with evidence as well, my students were writing with more nuance. They were thinking about sources and credibility when they authorized, stretching their thinking after encountering new evidence when they extended, and identifying weaknesses in other arguments when they countered. After three opportunities to practice argument writing, they were beginning to move beyond "just proving it."

Student Use of Signal Phrases

In addition to writing more nuanced arguments, my students' writing has changed in other ways since I started using the C3WP mini-units. When students wrote their first arguments for my class, most of them did not use signal phrases to introduce their evidence. Signal phrases are the small phrases writers use to introduce quotes and other evidence from source material in their writing, such as "according to..." or "Harris states…" By the third C3WP mini-unit, more than two thirds of them consistently used signal phrases like these to introduce quotes and paraphrases from the sources we read.

Nicole used three different signal phrases in her social media argument: "researchers in a survey found that..," "according to the article…," and "the article wants to give..." All three of her pieces of evidence came from an article that did not give an author's name, so it made sense that she did not include an author in her signal phrase. Christina, on the other hand, used a signal phrase to authorize a quote, writing "According to William Deresiewicz, an author of an op-ed in the *New York Times*…" She authorized her evidence by not only stating the author's name, but by explaining who he was and what type of article her evidence came from.

Quantity of Student Commentary

Students also wrote much more in terms of commentary to connect their evidence to their claims. In their first arguments, before starting the C3WP mini-units, most students used one piece of evidence from a source, meaning either a quote or paraphrased passage, in their arguments, and they wrote very little commentary about those pieces of evidence. Emma's first argument, for example, primarily listed new pieces of evidence, one after the other, without commenting on them or connecting them to her claim at all. Alexander only included one piece of evidence from a source in his first argument with no commentary. Most of his argument was based exclusively on his personal experiences instead.

By their fourth arguments, most of my students were not only using evidence from the sources, but writing at least two sentences of commentary about each one as well. Not only that, but hardly any of their commentary was used merely to summarize the evidence. Instead, they were using their commentary to explain how their evidence illustrated their claim, to explore implications of the evidence, and to extend on the evidence in ways that connected it back to their claims.

	Argument 1	Argument 2	Argument 3	Argument 4
Benedict	2.3	4.6	2.5	2.3
Emma	0	2	2	2
Christina	1.3	2	2	2.3
Alanna	2	2	2	2.3
Nicole	2	2.3	2.2	4
Alexander	0	3	1	2
Amanda	.75	0	2.3	2

Table 1: Average number of sentences of commentary written about each piece of evidence

Student Reactions to the C3WP

My students responded really well overall to the C3WP mini-units that we did in the first semester. They explained in interviews following the completion of the third mini unit that they liked the units, and saw them as relevant to their own lives. Alexander said that he thought the C3WP mini-units were "showing us that we can be affected by all these things, and they affect a lot of the people in this current time." Christina particularly liked the fourth mini-unit about social media. She said, "I feel like the social media was a good one. And every kid could relate to it… every kid can connect to social media in a different way."

Because so many of the topics were relevant to their lives, many of my students said that they used their own life experiences to help develop their claims. Of his fourth argument on social media, Alexander said, "I mainly based it around my own life and what affects my life." Nicole said of her argument on the same topic, "I wanted to put out my message for what I thought about it. I like take pieces of the evidence and put them in my own words to like go along with my message." My students already had a lot to say about the C3WP mini-unit topics before we even started, and that helped many of them take a position.

Each C3WP mini-unit groups together text sets that provide multiple perspectives on an issue, and some of my students noted how they used those sources to come to their claims, rather than looking for evidence to back up pre-existing claims and ideas. Amanda said that she chose her claim "because of all the articles we read," and Christina said that she came to her claim through reading as well. Benedict said that he thinks the mini-units we did will "teach us to look at multiple pieces of evidence before making a claim." The variety of perspectives helped students to evaluate different sources before making a claim.

I also asked my students to explain what they were thinking when they chose specific pieces of evidence. After the four C3WP mini-units, students described evaluating the strength of their evidence when thinking about where to place it and considering different audiences when selecting which evidence to use.

Alexander used one piece of evidence in his argument about everything you post can go either against you or for you in social media. He said that he used it to "kind of show that['s] your life." He said he saw it "as a very strong piece of evidence to use because it can affect you massively for when you want a job or to get into college."

Christina used two pieces of evidence in her argument about social media. She considered how her quotes would affect her audience, explaining that she put her first quote first because "it wasn't the strongest out of all my paragraphs, but it was to get them more interested basically." She was thinking about how to hook her readers at the beginning of her argument. Of her second piece of evidence, she said, "It was my strongest out of my two paragraphs, and I felt like it was a good way to end with the positivity." She thought that it would be more convincing, and she wanted to end on an optimistic note.

Nicole had an adolescent audience in mind for her social media argument. She said her first piece of evidence "just like screamed my name, because you know, like, I'm a teenager, I relate to this stuff…And like it kind of like grabs the reader's attention if they're my age, because they've probably been through this before." She went on to say, "I don't know if like an adult would understand how social media is" and that her intended reader was "mostly just like people my age." Even though this informal argument was turned in to me, the teacher, Nicole was thinking about a broader audience when she wrote it.

Conclusion

I found my way to the College, Career, and Community Writers Program because I saw a need in my classroom. My students struggled to write nuanced, debatable claims, to select evidence, to use signal phrases and quotation marks, and to use commentary to connect evidence to their claims. The C3WP mini-units have helped me to focus on those skills with much greater frequency, allowing my students to practice using evidence from source material in their writing at least three times each semester. Since implementing the C3WP mini-units, I have seen substantial growth in all of those skills. More than that, my students find the units to be engaging and relevant to their lives. Reluctant writers who had not turned in much all year wrote full pages for the video games article. Students were asking me if there was a maximum length for their social media articles because they were so passionate about what they were writing. The C3WP mini-units have transformed the way I teach argument, and my students have grown as a result.

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