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The Transformative Effects of Authentic Argumentative Writing

MEG GROSSNICKLE

“So, can I write back?” Before me stood a student excited, slightly irritated, and challenged. In her hand was the superintendent’s response to her letter on later start times for high school. Jessica was not known for finishing assignments. All year I had received partially completed work, and now here she stood asking if she could do extra work. On her own time. And, she wasn’t even asking for a grade. Isn’t this the dream of teachers, to see this level of engagement? Naturally, I said yes and off she went, determined to make a change.

Getting to this point of engagement was not easy. What in teaching is? But, now here was the payoff to the hard work both the class and I had engaged in: energized students who were learning important reading, writing, and critical thinking skills that would help them better understand and operate in their world.

Two years prior to this moment, I began looking for ways to change my classroom dynamic. When looking at the curriculum and planning out my year, the argumentative essay loomed large. It called for a traditional persuasive style essay embedded with research. It was long, it was boring, the students didn’t enjoy writing the essays, and I didn’t enjoy reading them. I am sure many teachers have found themselves in a similar situation and, like me, soothed their frustrations with the thought that at least when they get to college they will know how to write.

But in a world of developing technologies and ideas, with more students seeking paths outside the traditional four year college, how important is the standard argumentative research essay?

This is the question I wrestled with as I opened up my planbook. So, I decided I would try something different with the unit, although by no means a brand new idea in the language arts field. Instead of research papers, students

would write a well-researched letter persuading the reader about an issue. I wanted students to pick a topic they were passionate about, select an audience that was in a position to do something, and craft a letter to inspire change. Then we would mail them.

By and large, students liked this initial attempt at an authentic argument. They were still meeting all of the standards outlined in the unit, referring to mentor texts, and working through the revision process, but now they were authentically engaged. They had a real audience that was not just the teacher. There was intrinsic motivation for editing to meet grammar standards. Many of the students received responses to their letter which was an added joy and cause for celebration at the end of this unit. I was inspired by the increased level of engagement and achievement that I had witnessed in my classes.

While debriefing this unit with a colleague, I realized that students are surrounded by real argumentative texts everyday. Why limit this assignment to just letters? Twitter threads, infographics, documentaries, photo essays, TED talks, surround students all the time and all share arguments with an audience.

Practicing authentic writing is becoming an increasingly important skill. While authentic learning may have many connotations, my definition was students writing for a specific purpose, writing to a real audience that could provide feedback, and having opportunities for choice. In considering the expansion of this unit to include multiple genres, I was reassured by research and ever emerging best practices for writing. Knowing that “opening up space for composing alternative kinds of compositions naturally lends itself to a wider range of decision making on the part of the writer” (Coppola, 2020, p. 36), my hope was that this would drive intrinsic motivation and overall participation in the classroom. Research shows that engaging in authentic

experiences will help students develop and own their content mastery. The focus on building skills through authentic texts not only increases engagement, but also has a positive effect on achievement. John Warner (2018) states, “To write is to make choices, word by word, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph. Writers choose what they want to write about, whom they want to write to, and why they’re writing” (p. 5). The process of making choices is what helps students build understanding and skills. It was clear to me that students needed to have more control at every stage of the writing process.

When looking specifically at intentional and standards-aligned instruction in disciplinary writing, the Disciplinary Essential Practices states that in the course of teaching different genres of writing, the teacher “provides students practice in writing in different modalities, registers, voices, and rhetorical styles, using different media for different purposes and audiences” (p.7). Looking at authentic argumentative texts, I saw that here was a chance to provide students with just the learning experience that the Disciplinary Essential Practices outlines. Students would be reading, analyzing, and crafting texts through the lens of “how do writers craft their arguments for an audience?” And considering “—it is essential to consider how we might seamlessly blend both traditionally alphabetic forms of composition, which privilege a limited number of students, and alternative forms of composition, which share access with a much wider range of students, into our practice” (Coppola, 2019, p. 17), opening up the types of texts that students would interact with and write allowed for a more inclusive classroom that reflected the world outside of school.

So when the next year rolled around and it was once again argumentative writing time, I expanded my own notion of a text. Why not provide more choice to better engage students and provide all students with an access point to argumentative writing? Want to build a Twitter thread? Go for it. Present a TED talk to your classmates? Yes, please. Create a photo essay and share it on your blog? Let’s see what happens.

Teaching and Facilitating

Embarking on this unit meant that students had to redefine and engage in meaningful discourse centering around research, rhetorical strategies, and crafting for a specific audience. Was this chaotic? Yes, but I would like to call it structured chaos. No two students were doing

exactly the same thing, and I found that the learning could not support a cookie cutter class structure. While students were working independently or in groups much of the time, the class was still brought together through mini-lessons that took place nearly every day. The mini-lessons often started our class period and covered the standards for the unit. We grounded our learning of essential skills through revisiting short articles we had previously read as a class. As a class, we made an anchor chart listing all of the strategies that we noticed writers used, another was devoted specifically to what types of evidence writers use, and we had one referencing how to evaluate sources. Our anchor charts hung around the room and set the expectations for argumentation regardless of the type of text. The students’ charge then became to examine their mentor texts and see how these concepts or skills were applied within the genre they selected. Groups of students were able to create their own anchor charts to refer back to throughout the writing process. In examining thesis statements, for example, some genre groups found that the thesis may not always be at the very beginning of the text. While many TED talks, Twitter threads, and letters featured a thesis toward the beginning of the text, the thesis of an infographic may be in the title, or the thesis for a photo essay may come near the end. All genres used thesis statements, but the placement varied by genre and for effect. When drafting, students had to be even more purposeful with their thesis. Sure, in the traditional essay everyone knew where the thesis would go, but now students had to think about the most effective placement for their thesis.

Much of the class time was available to students for researching, working, and revising. A group of two might be discussing a craft move in a tweet, while another group of four discussed footnotes for an infographic, and an individual student might be doing more research on their topic. Topics, text formats, and strategies differed from student to student, but all students were crafting an authentic argument in the way that best suited their ultimate purpose. Allowing students this level of autonomy did not mean that the class was a free for all, but it did mean that there was more freedom for everyone in the classroom, including me. I was no longer bound by being the single expert on all of writing within the classroom. Students were becoming experts in the genre that they chose; they were constructing knowledge and critical thinking without the safety net of the all-knowing teacher. I put myself in the position of

facilitator, not disseminator of information. I tried to guide students, through modeling and questioning, to their own understanding of argumentative writing. I was pushing for students to take more ownership of their learning. This focus became the guiding principle for me at every decision point.

I didn't have to be the expert in every genre and topic, rather I needed to be comfortable facilitating analysis. Having a list of go-to metacognitive questions was essential. And, through not being the expert in every genre, I found it easier to ensure that students were truly doing the cognitive work. I couldn't slip into the bad habit of "saving" the student and providing the "correct" answer, because I was learning alongside my students. When students would ask if their mentor text was "good" or ask me to explain the strategies the author was using, I would respond with questions of my own. Having a list of go-to metacognitive questions became essential. My go to questions became:

- What trends do you notice in your mentor texts?
- Which mentor text do you think is most effective? Why?
- Why do you think the author did that?
- How does this support the author's main argument?
- Do you think this is effective? Why or why not?

These types of questions allowed for students to do the critical thinking. Often I was asked my opinion on the quality of mentor texts or student writing, the classic "is this good?" question. With my list of questions, I could invite students to be partners in the conversation. Asking the student what they thought about the text and why they thought that led to moments of real learning. Through metacognitive questions, students were paying closer attention to the quality of evidence, specific word choice, and organization. Using this guided instruction approach, I was not just disseminating information or rules they needed to follow, rather students were constructing their own knowledge. This worked especially well for students like Alicia. Alicia was the type of student who tried hard, but still struggled in reaching mastery. She paid attention and completed work on time, but often felt overwhelmed and needed interventions to feel confident and be successful in her growth. In asking questions and positioning myself as a learner alongside her, I saw Alicia's confidence grow and her mastery of the skills develop quickly. She was building her understanding, not just trying to memorize requirements and rules I shared.

Pushing this further, students next gathered their own mentor texts. This has a powerful impact on the class culture as students came to class excited to share what they had found. It also provided opportunities for rich discussion around the idea of what makes for effective craft moves within a specific genre. Near the beginning of the drafting process, all students brought in one or two examples of what they thought was an effective argument in their genre. These examples became their mentor texts for the unit. Students with the same genre grouped up to examine similarities, annotate craft moves, and ultimately decide which one or two mentor texts were the most effective and why. Through the cultivation of mentor texts, students were engaging in critical thinking, evaluating sources, and building their knowledge of argumentative skills.

At every step of the writing process, I was conferencing with students. Even just quick, two minute check-ins allowed me to ask questions, guide thinking, and push learning. Often even just asking students what they were working on and to explain their thinking led to revelations. In conducting quick conferences, I was able to meet the individual needs of learners and better support those who need extra guidance. These quick conferences helped students stay on track and motivated to complete their work.

I was worried at first that this process and class structure would lead to a total loss of control of the classroom. But through this unit, I fully understood what it meant to be a facilitator within the classroom. I conducted mini lessons, conferenced with individuals or groups, and allowed for students to learn as they needed. When it was work time, some students may have been examining mentor texts, while others were writing independently, and others may have been conferencing with peers. Just as there was flexibility in the argument and genre students were working on, so too was there flexibility in the learning pace. All students had the same ultimate due date, but through embarking in organic revision, some students needed more time at different stages of the learning. Were there students off task? Absolutely. But, shifting into a facilitator role meant I was not confined to the front of the classroom and was able to redirect students much more quickly and subtly than I had been able to before. There were more opportunities for inviting students back into learning and I found that building in structures for accountability reduced off-task behavior. Students tracked their own progress, set goals for completing tasks, and

reflected on what they had accomplished. Larger than these accountability structures, though, students were actually engaged in this work. The learning was personal to each individual. There were no worksheets or outlines for a five paragraph essay. Students had ownership over nearly every aspect of this process.

Bryant was a student who put in just enough effort to keep his grades up for athletics. Nothing seemed to make him passionate about reading or writing. At the beginning of this process, he struggled to select a topic and wanted to be told what to write about and how to write it. This was a student who was used to checklists and templates for writing. He had grown complacent and just wanted a formula to follow so he could check off the assignment as done. Now, however, he had to make decisions and take control of his learning. This did not come easy. It took a lot of conferencing to get his argument started. Even selecting a topic involved him to step outside of his comfort zone and share his own thoughts on an issue. However, once he decided to write about NCAA athletes and whether or not they should be paid, Bryant became increasingly engaged with the class and his writing. He put in more effort through the revision of his twelve tweets than I had seen him do all year. He was continually analyzing individual word choice, evaluating the quality of his sources, and asking for feedback from peers. He became invested in the outcome of his project and as a result learned far more than he would have from following the standard script for teaching argument.

Management

So what did this all look like? I certainly borrowed from the ideas of project based learning. When describing a project based classroom Enloe and Newell (2005) state that the class has, “A structure of daily practice that includes a process leading the student from brainstorming to collecting resources to embedding standards to developing products to being assessed” (p. 34). This was the model I kept in mind as I crafted the scope and sequence of the unit. At the beginning of the unit, students selected topics that they were interested in and conducted research on the issue to help them decide what their argument would be. Topics ranged from issues specific to our school like school start time or hat policies to global concerns like climate change or the cost of college. Students created research logs, and throughout this process, we talked about what makes for credible research, how to cite sources, the definitions of plagiarism, etc. After

gathering initial research, students developed their argument, defined their thesis, and set their purpose for writing. This information was captured on a contract that students turned in. This held all students accountable and provided an opportunity for feedback.

The next step was for students to choose the audience for their argument. This ranged from senators to editors of newspapers to local school administrators and the ever popular general public audience. The charge to students was to think of who is in a position to do something about the issue that they selected. Many students found that when selecting a specific audience, they had to go back to tweak their argument and thesis. Students were initiating revisions and organically realizing the necessity behind the revision process. Already, writing for an authentic audience was driving students' learning; the stakes were higher than a traditional essay and students wanted to come across as thoughtful, educated, and impassioned.

After selecting an audience, students had to decide what was a good medium for reaching their audience. Students had to match their type of text with their purpose and the scope of their audience and provide a rationale for why that text made sense with their topic and audience. Students were not just going to complete a TED talk because they thought it was easy. To help model this, the class looked at different types of texts written for different audiences. Real life examples were everywhere. Lin-Manuel Miranda was passionate about efforts to provide aid to Puerto Rico and had written a rap, composed a New York Time Op-Ed, and engaged in Twitter discussions surrounding the subject. Here was a great, real life example of how an argument and audience can drive the platform and style that the writer uses. With each example we would examine the type of audience, what the argument was, and consider why this specific platform was selected. Students were building an understanding of not just what to communicate, but how to communicate.

Students crafted their arguments in their notebook, not officially publishing their texts until the end of the unit. Students would write out the arguments they wanted to include, and then decide how best to group ideas. Pages in their notebooks became filled with sketches of infographics, rough drafts of tweets, and the hashtags they would include. Some students brought in their own technology to draft and revise on. While there was flexibility throughout the unit in pacing for individual students, all had the same final

due date and were prepared to send their argument out to their audience. By the time the due date came, students had discussed their text, received feedback, and engaged in revision multiple times. Working with their peers throughout the revision process was essential and organically came about. Students talked with those who were writing similar genres, but also those who were not; because students were putting their final drafts out to an audience beyond the teacher, it became even more important to make sure that arguments were clear and strong to all readers. When students were ready to revise, they had a notebook and classroom full of resources at their disposal. The classroom buzzed with conversations that were academic and genuine.

Grading and Assessment

Naturally, an initial fear was about grading this wide array of student work. How can you grade a series of tweets next to a TED talk? The focus for grading had to be on the skills, not a list of requirements or boxes to check off. Our district had created a single point argumentative rubric for the traditional essay. Was it possible that this rubric could be used for the authentic texts my students were completing? Absolutely. And I used the same rubric for all students. Through focusing on the skills, not length requirements or having a certain number of quotes, students were more focused on the actual learning and not just jumping through a series of hoops. After completing their projects, students self assessed where they felt they were on the rubric and included their rationale. This led to more clarity for me in my role as assessor.

The rubric was a constant component of this unit. Early on, after looking at some sample texts and explaining the assignment, I asked my students how they thought their authentic texts should be graded. The requirements they identified looked almost exactly like the skill-based, one-point rubric that had already been developed by our school district. This told me students understood the purpose of the task they were engaging in and were themselves able to recognize the essential argumentative skills that unified all of their writing genres. The rubric was referred to throughout the writing process. It was not intended to be just an end of unit assessment piece, rather it was a tool to help guide students as they crafted and revised their arguments.

In the back of my mind was also a concern over standardized testing as it related to the unit. Eventually students would be assessed through a standardized test,

would this learning translate? It was important for me to realize that standardized testing is just one genre. The standards for this unit came from Common Core, and whether students demonstrated their understanding through answering a multiple choice question, writing a timed essay, or crafting a TED Talk, the standards remained the same. What was important was that students fully understood the essential learnings encompassed in the standards. Rather than teaching to the test, I wanted students to see themselves as successful writers who could master any genre. Talking about standardized testing as one genre opened up students to see that skills will translate across different mediums; at its core, the learned skills are the same.

Take for example, grading the effectiveness and citation of evidence. All students included evidence from their research, it just looked different and was cited according to the rules of their genre. Throughout the writing process, students had their own mentor texts and anchor charts to refer back to. Students doing infographics learned about quoting research and using footnotes, those doing Ted Talks learned to cite sources within their speech, and students crafting tweets embedded articles and retweeted others. While each student may have turned in something that looked different, all students learned how to support a position with evidence and cite the source. I had to change my mindset to focus on the skill and not just look for what my preconception of evidence was. This mindset shift helped me better understand the standards students needed to meet. I realized that when teaching the traditional argumentative essay, I was limiting students to my narrow view of what was allowable as evidence. I had to broaden the notions of evidence to better fit in a 21st century world of expanding literacies.

An unexpected benefit for me was how easy it became to grade the final texts. Since I had been conferencing with students and observing their discussions, I was already familiar with their topics, arguments, craft moves, and genres. For many of the texts this was the fifth or sixth time I was reading it. I was assessing the degree to which students showed proficiency, but I didn't need to be the expert in every genre because I had already talked through many of the decisions that students made and had been learning alongside them.

Authentic Audiences

A critical piece of this assignment was that I was not

the only audience. While grades were important to many students, even more important was the reaction and response that they wanted and received from their audiences. One audience became their classmates. Throughout this process, students were sharing what they were working on and asking for feedback from their peers. To showcase all of the hard work, students displayed their texts in class for their peers to read and review through a gallery walk. While their peers became an audience, the true driving force behind much of the motivation for students was that students had to put their writing out into the world for their specific audience. Tweets were published for the public; letters were mailed to superintendents, congressmen, and senators; infographics were posted on Instagram, posters in the hallway, and printed on flyers that went to specific classes; TED Talks were given in class. Many students got timely if not immediate feedback from their audience. Seeing likes and comments on their posts had a dramatically positive impact on the class culture. Some students were embarrassed or nervous about putting their ideas out there, but overwhelmingly they found support and an audience that appreciated their work and efforts. What became imperative was that it was no longer just the teacher providing feedback. There was an increased sense of intrinsic motivation because of the real audience. Students came into class over the next several weeks excited to share who else had responded to their letter, watched their video on Youtube, or retweeted their argument.

I also learned very quickly who were the senators, congressmen, and public figures that would respond to every letter. Getting feedback had had such a positive effect that this became an invaluable piece of information when I taught this unit in the future. If a student wanted to write to a senator, I could steer them towards a senator I knew would provide a response. I kept a list of those people and offices that would respond and added to it every time this unit came around. The responses may seem like a small thing, but through getting responses my students felt heard, they felt that their voice mattered, and they felt that they could make a difference. As one student stated in their reflection, "I really liked the opportunity to actually write to her (Senator Stabenow) and have a small chance that she could do something in the real world, which is something I never got to do in other LA classes."

Reflection

The final products were better than what I had hoped

for. Students didn't just throw something together last minute to earn a passing grade; they had been invested and this showed through in the skills they demonstrated. This was an extremely powerful experience for my students like Jessica who wrote to the superintendent. She was more engaged, she showed growth in standards and skills, and she became confident with her writing. It was not just students like Jessica that saw big gains. Positive effects were also seen in traditionally high achieving students like Sarah. Sarah was taking accelerated language arts classes, scored above average on all standardized tests, and could write a traditional essay within one class period and earn an A. I knew this unit had the potential to be powerful, but it wasn't until I saw Sarah's work that I fully appreciated the positive effects. Sarah chose to complete an infographic on the rising cost of colleges and universities. She compiled the research, crafted a thesis, and selected an audience. But now, by making an infographic Sarah didn't just have to take into consideration the structure of an argument, she had to decide which pieces of research were most important to include in this more limited format. The infographic would not have been effective if she had overloaded it with information, so evaluating the strength of the evidence and how important it was to her claim became a main focus. Sarah had to consider not just which evidence to include, but also how big would that evidence be in relation to the other detail on the infographic, which colors would best support her position, what images would convey the point she was trying to make. In posting this infographic to Instagram, Sarah had a limited amount of space to write a caption that would sum up her main argument. Word choice, transitions, sequencing, and sentence structure were suddenly even more important than they had been in the traditional essay. Through limiting the length by so much, Sarah was doing more cognitive work. This advanced student had been challenged and pushed to do more critical thinking.

Bringing authentic writing into my classroom has become a transformative experience. Through allowing for individuality and diversity in the writing process, text genres, and structure of the classroom, students took ownership over their learning and produced something that was uniquely theirs. Did some students get more out of it than others? Of course. But I am extremely confident that breaking away from the standard format of the traditional essay and moving to authentic writing pushed every student to a higher level of achievement and engagement. Just as I wanted students to be authentic, this process and unit came about authentically

for me. I was dissatisfied with the traditional way of teaching the argument and through reflection and revision, I refined the classroom's structure and purpose. Creating opportunities for diversity and student choice allowed for entry points at every step of learning. Every student could be successful with every standard; students could build and demonstrate their learning in a way that interested and resonated with them as an individual. When acknowledging and striving to meet individual differences, interests, and needs for students, it became necessary to open up my definition of text and my understanding of the ways in which learning can take place.

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