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Fostering Students' Ability to Write Arguments

The aftermath of the terrible 2011 earthquake in Japan was marked by a proliferation of questions that were essentially geographic in nature. Should the Japanese have built their nuclear reactors where they did? Has the United States taken sufficient precautions in its construction of nuclear plants? Are we prepared to deal with a similar disaster?

Michael W. Smith



People have offered different answers to these questions and have provided arguments in their attempt to convince others to share their views. Arguments have always been central to public discourse. As Richard Andrews notes, "Imagine, for a moment, a world without argument. It would either be an authoritarian or tyrannical state. . . . [T]o be fully conscious, is to be ready for argumentation; for discussion 'with edge'" (2009, pp. 3–4).

Just as we want our society to be a place where intellect and differences are celebrated, so too do we want our classrooms to provide forums for vibrant intellectual exchanges. It is little wonder that schools place such an emphasis on argumentation. Turning to Andrews again: "[Argument] also refers to the most highly prized type of academic discourse: something that is deemed essential to a thesis, to an article in a research journal, to a dissertation, essay, and to many other kinds of writing within schools and the academy" (2009, p. 1).

In National Geographic's *World Cultures and Geography* program, students do a variety of writing, but our instructional focus is on argument. If students are to understand why geography matters, they need to engage in arguments that depend on geographic knowledge. In so doing, they learn skills that prepare them not only for their future schooling but also for their lives outside of school.

THE RIGHT APPROACH

The Guided Writing strand in *World Cultures and Geography* teaches students to write effective arguments by articulating the strategies experienced writers employ when they develop arguments. Students are then given extended practice in employing these strategies on their own.

The approach is in line with the recommendation of the *Writing Next* report, which found that the most powerful kind of writing instruction involves "explicitly and systematically teaching steps necessary for planning, revising, and/or editing text" (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 15). The research of George Hillocks helps explain why this is so (cf. 1986, 1995, 2007, 2011). Throughout his writing, Hillocks draws a distinction between declarative knowledge, or knowledge that can be said, and procedural knowledge, or a kind of knowledge that has to be performed. That distinction is crucially important for, as Hillocks demonstrates again and again, declarative knowledge doesn't result in procedural knowledge. Knowing geographic concepts does not mean that students can use them effectively in their writing. They have to be taught how to use them.

Unfortunately, much of the writing instruction students receive is not designed to help them develop procedural knowledge. Think back on how you were taught writing. My bet is that most of your teachers used what I call the Assign and Assess method. That is, you worked in class to develop knowledge on whatever the content of the class was and then your teachers assigned writing exercises that allowed you to display that knowledge. Finally, some weeks later, you received a grade on the assignment along with a few comments justifying the grade and providing instruction for future work.

Not only is the Assign and Assess method inadequate in helping students develop procedural knowledge, but it also may cause students to resist a teacher's efforts to help them improve. In his landmark study on childhood, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson offers an explanation for why students who need their teachers' help the most often do not seek it (1963).

He identifies the central psychosocial conflict of school-age students, the stage of most students beginning middle school, as industry versus inferiority. Middle school students are struggling to assert their competence. Pointing out where they went astray doesn't help them develop it.

My co-author Jeff Wilhelm and I repeatedly saw the importance of fostering students' competence in our study of the literate life of adolescent boys both in school and out (Smith & Wilhelm 2002). One young man provided what could have been a mantra for the whole group when we asked him why he liked playing lacrosse, his favorite outside-of-school activity: "I just like being good at it." If the young men in our study didn't feel competent in an activity, they chose not to engage in it.

Yet they did want to engage in argumentation. The young men we studied "did not want to play 'guess what the teacher already knows.' They wanted to solve problems, debate, and argue in ways through which they could stake their identity and develop both ideas and functional tools that they could share and use with others in very immediate ways. They wanted to develop the competence and capacities of real experts" (Smith & Wilhelm, 2006, p. 57).

AN ARGUMENTATION MODEL

The *World Cultures and Geography* program helps students develop their expertise in writing effective arguments in several ways. First, Toulmin's model of argumentation, the one that informs the approach the program takes, is built on an understanding of how

oral argumentation works in the real world (1958). Anyone who has spent any time with adolescents knows that they are avid and excellent arguers. The program helps them develop an articulated understanding of what they do all the time in their everyday life and then apply it to their writing. The National Commission on Writing calls for curricula to build bridges between students' in-school and out-of-school lives. This program does so.

Second, we provide lots of instruction and practice. We give students practice in mastering each element of Toulmin's model. We give them practice developing clear, specific, and reasonable claims. We help them understand how to provide specific evidence and how to explain the connection between the evidence and the claim. We work with them to anticipate and respond to counterarguments. We also help them master the sentence structures they will need to effectively express themselves. We then work with students to apply what they have learned to a variety of different kinds of arguments.

Third, we provide explicit instruction to help students successfully complete particular assignments. They learn to unpack the prompt, plan their paper, assess its effectiveness, and revise their argument.

A final thought experiment: Think of some complex activity you have mastered. Mastering it probably took time and instruction and practice. Writing arguments is a crucial and complex skill. *World Cultures and Geography* provides students the time, instruction, and practice they need to become competent at it. No comparable textbook does the same.

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