Former ENGL 461 Student

Praxis Report

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**Using Discussion and Debate to Develop and Enrich Persuasive Writing**

**Introduction:**

Persuasive writing is one of the most important and standardized outcomes of middle and high school English classrooms. Being able to effectively present and support an argument is a skill vital to our students as critical thinkers, writers, and citizens. However, our tendencies in persuasive writing curriculum do not serve our students well; by asking them to make a casual leap across a canyon from the research side to the writing side, we do not adequately assist them in learning to develop and express their ideas. What, then, can serve as a bridge? Classroom discussion and debate connect prior research to formal writing in a structured but organic way. Similarly to other classroom tools, discussion and debate must be handled with care—they require a foundation, necessarily involve nuanced experiences, and do not always come naturally to students in a formal and respectful way. But, with proper care, classroom discussion and debate allow students’ arguments to interact on a verbal plane used by the teacher to develop proficiency in critical thought and methods of persuasion. This, in turn, will translate into more complex and more credible argumentative writing.

**Research:**

**1) Felton, Mark K. and Suzanne Herko. "From Dialogue to Two-sided Argument: Scaffolding Adolescents’ Persuasive Writing." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy 47.8* (2004): 672-683. Web. 16 March 2015.**

**(a)** The *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* is a resource that focuses on practical ideas first tested at the classroom level and rooted in research and intellectual theory. Its intended audience is educators of older learners—those at the high school level and beyond. Accordingly, its content focuses on such areas as young adult literature, the integration of technology, media, and popular culture in the classroom, and current literacy trends. Its contributors are almost always current educators doing research within their own classrooms. This research usually includes a mixture of academic research and observations and experiences within the educator’s own classroom or school. This journal is sponsored by the International Reading Association (IRA), an international literacy advocacy organization. Instead of being structured in themes, each journal contains a diverse range of topics; a recent issue includes both “Web-Mediated Knowledge Synthesis for Educators” and “Parents as Participants in Their Children’s Learning: A Tall Order for Parents in Rural Kenya.” The journal is published online and is also published in print eight times a year: every month from September to May, with a combined December/January issue.

**(b)** In “From dialogue to two-sided argument: Scaffolding adolescents’ persuasive writing” (2004), Mark K. Felton and Suzanne Herko claim that using two-sided debates in the English classroom will bridge the gap between natural, verbal argumentation and argumentative writing by building a foundation of “metacognitive understanding of the structure and function of argument” (875). To support this claim, the authors first address the specific problems seen in students’ argumentative writing and explain why classroom debate can help to mend them; they then offer a model of a classroom workshop that uses two-sided argument to scaffold students’ persuasive writing. Felton and Herko’s purpose is to show educators how to bridge the gap between verbal argumentation and the written argumentative essay in order to provide them with a solution to trends of weak argumentative writing in students. The authors establish a casual and informational relationship with the audience of current or future educators, who they see as needing encouragement in this frustrating area.

**(c)** This article is directly related to my focus and offers helpful insights into the discouraging patterns seen in students’ argumentative writing today. It offers a solution—two-sided argument—and a practical application, a model of scaffolding. This piece is very valuable because of its transition from abstract idea to concrete application. Though for my Praxis component I am more interested in discussion rather than the article’s practical debate application, elements of the article are still very relevant and helpful, especially the introduction in which the authors identify some of the main problems in weak argumentative writing. One of these are is that arguments often only contain a conclusion supported by one or two claims; these essays “lack the argumentative elaborations found in effective persuasive writing” (673) that can include addressing alternative perspectives. Must more than just addressing them, strong writing responds to them by offering counter-arguments or perhaps even tempering their own argument with “reservations and qualifications to their position” (673). In contrast, the authors argue, students naturally utilize these skills in verbal debate and argument. Their model of scaffolding argumentative writing acts as a solution to this because it offers students clear demonstrations of weaving the natural verbal argument and the more difficult written word.

**2)** **Larson, Bruce E. and Timothy A. Keiper. "Discussion and Debate." *Instructional Strategies for Middle and High School*. 2nd Ed. New York: Routledge, 2013. 246-272. Print.**

**(a)** This chapter does not appear in a journal; rather, it appears in a book about an umbrella subject, instructional strategies. Therefore, it is not likely to include further information about discussion and debate—this is the only chapter that indicates this topic as its focus. In addition, because the book is intended for all content areas, it does not include information specific to the teaching of writing. This particular chapter is the only one that will be beneficial to the focus of my Praxis Report.

**(b)** In the chapter “Discussion and Debate” found in Bruce E. Larson and Timothy A. Keiper’s *Instructional Strategies for Middle and High School* (2013), the authors argue that because of the benefits of using discussion and debate, corresponding methods should be used in all content area classrooms. Larson and Keiper first provide research findings in support of discussion and debate and then outline the structures, uses, and assessment methods of six types of discussion (as well as debate); they take the reader through each step of the planning and executing process of these plans, setting up a holistic perspective of the topic. The authors’ purpose is to teach readers to effectively use discussion and debate in order to promote a teacher and student engagement with these argumentative strategies that they believe will better their classrooms. A casual tone establishes a helpful and instructive relationship between the authors and readers while the article’s “educationese” diction denotes its intended audience, middle and high school teachers.

**(c)** This chapter is a valuable resource because it functions as an introduction to methods of discussion and debate that can be used in the classroom. It is very thorough; it takes the reader from research to planning to methods to assessment, including additional tips such as incorporating technology with the activities. It is especially relevant because of its introductory nature; it is an excellent starting place for learning what discussion and debate exercises look like in the classroom, how to effectively implement them, and what the purposes and intended outcomes should be.

While this chapter does not directly correlate with writing instruction—it is intended for teachers in all content areas—it provides me with necessary information for beginning my research on discussion and debate. It introduces terms and theories than I can now explore further through scholarly research. In addition, because it discusses areas in which they are beneficial, it provides a context in which to think about utilizing discussion and debate; skills such in “civil discourse, criticism, and argument” (248) are necessary in quality argumentative and persuasive writing.

**3) Sawch, Deb. "Asking and Arguing with Fact and Fiction: Using Inquiry and Critical Literacy to Make Sense of Literature in the World." *English Journal 101.2* (2011): 80-85. Web. 16 March 2015.**

**(a)** *English Journal* is a Bronze EXCEL Award-winning resource for ELA teachers at the middle and high school level. Sponsored by the National Council of the Teachers of English (NCTE), it serves as a source of information on a wide variance of topics that include the teaching of writing and technology inclusion. Its contributors are almost current classroom teachers who seek to impart their reflections on experiences, knowledge of skills or material, or models of lesson plans and units. Its audience is current educators and researchers, and the strongest of its contributions rely on or include academic research rather than straight experience (those that take on a teacher-researcher role). Each journal has a specific theme, such as “Poetry: Rhyme and Reason” and “Rethinking Research: Cultivating Inquiry in the English Classroom.” The journal is published every other month of the year.

**(b)** In her article “Asking and Arguing with Fact and Fiction: Using Inquiry and Critical Literacy to Make Sense of Literature in the World” (2011), Deb Sawch advocates for the establishment of a critical inquiry environment within the classroom that develops, challenges, and ultimately improves students’ argumentative writing. Sawch uses experiences with a self-created critical inquiry unit—including such strategies as Socratic seminars, nonfiction research, and writing groups—to justify this promotion, stating that her students’ final work was “written proof that inquiry uncovers powerful and original connections between literature and the world” (83). Her purpose is to showcase the methods and benefits of including a critical inquiry curriculum in the classroom in order to convince teachers of their importance. Sawch’s audience is current educators, which she provides with specific, instructional strategies intended for high school English classes; she admits that the initial curriculum was developed for an AP class, but adamantly argues that the content is relevant for all levels and that it has had success in lower-level classes in which it has been implemented.

**(c)** This article, though not specifically focused on discussion and debate, is directly relevant to my research because it links strategies of discussion and debate (writing groups, Socratic seminar) to improved argumentative writing by emphasizing the importance of modes of inquiry and how they impact writing outcomes. The term “think out loud,” is used frequently, an idea that addresses the “power of speaking as an essential prewriting strategy” (83) and allows for natural verbal expression to precede more difficult analytical writing. One easily identified verbal strategy is the Socratic seminar, which develops strong argumentative logic by teaching students to ask and respond to questions—in relation to writing, skills of questioning are essential to sturdy intellectual argument. Additionally, this occurred on a smaller scale when students engaged in small group discussion about their nonfiction research.

Another strategy implemented in Sawch’s unit was writing discussion groups, in which students gave each other feedback on drafted arguments. Sawch champions their effectiveness, stating that “not only did [they] spark even deeper discussion…they fostered more authentic collaboration and more legitimate and original defenses of particular arguments” (84). This is directly related to my research question because it provides a clear and concise template for a classroom practice that uses inquiry to bridge the gap between verbal expression and written argument; by structuring an organic and natural mode of argumentation (verbal expression), the teacher is able to encourage critical questioning and argument formation and then translate these skills onto the page.

**Praxis:**

**Description-in-Brief:** Students will engage in a Socratic Seminar in small groups. The seminar will not act as a debate but rather as a discussion in which ideas are organically either expanded or discarded based on their capacity to be discussed deeply within the group. Each group will be assigned a general question about a topic—in this case, a theme that is present in the novel they are reading in class—such as “How does violence function in *Romeo and Juliet*?” This activity will be student-monitored (ideally, an opportunity for the teacher to model in a similar activity will have occurred previously in the course) and, in this case, would operate in a junior or senior high school class. During the discussion, students will take notes on the ideas presented and show on paper how the idea developed into an argument by including the sound evidence and support/opposition that occurred. To end the seminar, each student will develop a working thesis based on what they personally found interesting or felt passionate about during the discussion and list a few points of evidence/support that they will develop on during their research. This activity could be used for every level, but because of the extent of student monitoring included here, as well as the level of questioning, it may not be appropriate for younger students.

**Learning Objectives:** The goal of this activity is to bridge the gap between argumentative speech—what Sawch calls “thinking out loud” (83)—and argumentative writing. Specifically, this discussion will teach students that the skills and methods they employ during their small group discussions will translate into skills and methods used to research and construct their essays. These skills include idea development, logical support, and acknowledgment of multiple perspectives. Strong argumentative writing takes ideas deeper than the issue’s surface level; rather than simply stating that violence in *Romeo and Juliet* has a negative impact on the two lovers and contributes to their untimely demise, a sustainable argument will suggest that violence functions as an inescapable cycle created and enforced by the two feuding families—and will be able to support it. The importance of logical support in both speech and writing becomes very visible within the Socratic circle—offered opinions are only accepted as viable by peers if they can be expanded upon with evidence; they cannot simply hang in the air. Finally, students will necessarily encounter varying perspectives during the activity and cannot simply act as the ruling opinion. One of the benefits of this activity occurring in small groups is that there is a lesser chance of a small percentage of the class population dominating the conversation. In impactful argumentative writing, opposing viewpoints are addressed and even refuted; when students confront a viewpoint opposing their own, they realize that they must continue on and either be open to a differing opinion or strengthen their own by being able to refute the opposition.

**Role in Curriculum:** Unfortunately, persuasive/argumentative writing is often the first essay done in the classroom. However, in order to present my ideal plan, I will pretend that the teacher has ultimate authority over the curriculum here. This Socratic Seminar activity would preferably occur after students have had some practice/refreshment on basic writing skills. This is not an activity easily paired with learning how to craft a thesis statement or forming paragraph structure. In addition, I would not want to simply drop this seminar in the middle of a unit—I would prepare students for success in the Socratic setting by both engaging the students in critical class discussion—while simultaneously modeling effective monitoring and leadership—and establishing a code of conduct that includes modes of respect such as not dominating the conversation and not judging others’ opinions. After this activity, I would have students work some more with their takeaway working thesis by expanding on a fantastic assignment from Sawch—bringing in nonfiction research. To help clarify/develop their focus, students would find 2-3 nonfiction sources that relate to what they’ve identified as being interested in and use another, more specific Socratic in which they present their argument in the context of these sources, using them to support their argument. The seminar would spend a designated time on each member of the group’s research, discussing it at a profound level. This will aid students in determining the strength of their support, suggestions for further avenues for research, and the understanding of the need for solid evidence from reliable sources in argumentative writing. The seminar is intended to introduce students to the benefits of discussion.

**Activity, detailed in steps:**

1. Introduce plan for the day (rather than waiting until groups have been formed so that there are no distractions). Include objectives, guidelines for discussion, guidelines for note-taking and intended takeaway assessment so that students will have the goal of the lesson in mind.
2. Break students into small groups of 3 or 4 and assign one member of the group to be the lead group monitor (the student filling this role will change with each time the group meets).
3. Assign each group a general theme, phrased as a question, for use to kick off discussion. Have these printed on a sheet of paper (ideally one for each group member) so they will have a visual of their focus during the conversation. Remind them to stay on task, but allow the theme to evolve into something entirely different than you were expecting or that you even thought of!
4. Monitor discussions by constantly moving throughout the room, spending intervals of a few minutes with each group. If deeper discussion needs to occur, interject with critical questions as prompts and watch to make sure the conversation deepens. If students do not seem to be behaving respectfully, remind students of guidelines and redirect the conversation with a new question or topic. Ensure that students are taking adequate, complex notes.
5. Midway through the discussion students, remind students of objectives, goals, and the importance of note-taking.
6. When there are 10 minutes left to the class period, instruct students to wrap up conversation and to pull out a fresh sheet of paper. Remind them of the takeaway assessment and identify clearly what you are looking for: a working thesis with 3-4 points of support. Remind them to choose what they felt most passionate about or were most interested in during the discussion.
7. Before leaving class, have students copy what they write down into their own notes for their own record.
8. Quickly review objectives of lesson and plans for moving forward with the unit—connect what they did in the lesson with forthcoming objectives and goals in the course.
9. Collect assessments at the classroom door as students exit.

**Assessment**: Because this activity is discussion *and* small group based, assessment is difficult. However, it can be done. An opportune time for this would be while walking around and monitoring; by taking notes on each student—how much they are participating, the depth of their comments, the quality of their note-taking—these can all be observed. However, they are each relative—a student may not be excited about the direction of the conversation during the time you are with his or her group—so it should not be translated into a strict grade. Rather, a general number on a spectrum—1 to 5, perhaps—will indicate to the student how well they are rising to your expectation. The working thesis takeaway at the end of the class period will be a better and more reliable source assessment. Each student turns one of these into the teacher, which he or she can look at quickly to determine the involvement of the student in the discussion: usually, the more in-depth thesis and support, the greater effort done by the student. In addition, this assessment will give credit to those students who are engaged with the topic and discussion but may not express it primarily through verbal communication. This, too, should not be a strict grade; the same spectrum could be used (as long as students know exactly what the numbers mean).

**Rationale:** This activity directly addresses weaknesses in student argumentative writing by using methods of discussion to help students translate persuasive skills and habits already natural in verbal conversation to their written argumentative essays. As Felton and Herko point out in their article, when adolescents are engaged in conversation, they “produce the very elements of elaborated argument that seem to be missing from their written essays” (Felton 673). By simulating this conversation in the non-threatening and easily accessible environment of discussion, students will feel comfortable putting these elements into practice. Discussion demands that students “work *cooperatively*” and has a central purpose of furthering knowledge, understanding, and judgment, “different from…[a] negotiation of power” (Larson 249) found in debate; additionally, because of the small group structure, students will have more opportunities to speak.

This activity is not meant to stand in for the entire argumentative essay curriculum; like Felton and Herko suggest, it should be scaffolded. As indicated in the Role in Curriculum section, this Socratic would follow experiences with classroom discussion and would precede a continuation of the development of the discussed topic by way of nonfiction research and subsequent discussions about the additional materials. The activity emphasizes what Sawch calls “speaking as an essential prewriting strategy” (Sawch 83) and so serves as a launch point for an environment that fosters critical inquiry. Rather than criticizing students for writing faults, this activity, with its tenants perpetuated throughout the unit, encourages students by showing them what they are already able to do-- argue with evidence and conviction. It teaches them additional skills such as inclusion and rebuttal of counter-arguments and will hopefully enhance their abilities to engage in respectful discussion. This Socratic Seminar activity develops the student holistically, with its components and methods of inquiry giving students a practical way to bridge the gap between natural verbal argumentation and effective, credible written argumentation.

**APPENDIX**: follows (print out and attach the first TEXT page (not the cover page) of each article you include.