

Teaching and Learning the Writing of Persuasive/Argumentative Discourse

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School students' performance in persuasive/argumentative writing is not as good as their performance in narrative writing. Typical weaknesses are lack of support for reasons, poor organization, and immature language. Persuasive writing is thought to be difficult because it is more cognitively demanding than narrative writing. Persuasive/argumentative writing should, however, be included in the elementary curriculum, for a number of reasons: persuasion occurs early in spoken language, precursors of argument appear in the writing of very young children, even poor persuasive writing shows embryonic forms of argument, and children's social and educational experiences offer abundant opportunities for contextually relevant writing.

Les élèves n'obtiennent pas d'aussi bons résultats lorsqu'on leur demande de rédiger un texte fondé sur des arguments que s'ils doivent faire une composition narrative. Les faiblesses les plus courantes sont les suivantes: arguments mal étayés, idées mal organisées et manque de profondeur. On considère que la rédaction d'un texte fondé sur des arguments est plus difficile parce qu'elle exige davantage sur le plan cognitif que la composition narrative. L'enseignement de l'art d'argumenter dans un texte devrait néanmoins faire partie de l'enseignement au primaire pour plus d'une raison: l'argumentation surgit tôt dans la langue parlée; les premières bases de l'argumentation apparaissent dans les textes de très jeunes enfants; même les textes les plus faibles du point de vue de l'argumentation présentent des formes embryonnaires de raisonnement et les expériences vécues par les enfants dans leur milieu social et scolaire offrent une foule de sujets pertinents sur lesquels on peut les inviter à écrire.

Traditional composition instruction emphasized direct instruction about desirable features of good writing, together with practice and correction (Applebee, 1974; Emig, 1971). Advocates of such methods believe that "knowing that" is a necessary prerequisite for "knowing how to," and that experience alone will not result in knowledge clear enough to guide the production of acceptable writing in a variety of genres. However, influential voices have spoken strongly against the usefulness of such direct instruction, emphasizing that the acquisition of written language is a natural process akin to the acquisition of oral language (e.g., Emig, 1981; Falk, 1979; Newkirk, 1989; Teale, 1982). Adherents of the

traditional position believe that the teacher-expert has information that can be transmitted to students. Adherents of the second position believe that the best way to "teach" writing is to let students write for their own real purposes, with little intervention by teachers apart from providing a supportive environment. This paper considers these opposing views in regard to persuasive/argumentative writing, and has three purposes:

- a. to examine evidence about students' performance in writing persuasive/argumentative discourse;
- b. to consider questions of difficulty and development; and
- c. to suggest appropriate teaching strategies.

Persuasive/argumentative writing has been chosen as the focus for several reasons. It is important both for academic success and for general life purposes. Historically, it has held a central place in western education (Connor, Gorman, & Vahapassi, 1987). The literate, educated person is expected to be able to articulate a position on important matters so as to persuade colleagues, fellow citizens, governments, and bureaucrats.

Argument has often been considered a difficult kind of writing (e.g., Moffett, 1968). But recent interpretations challenge both this view and the associated view that persuasive/argumentative writing should not be assigned to young writers. Given the importance of persuasive/argumentative writing, differing views about its difficulty, and competing views about ways of teaching writing, it seems useful to examine the respective roles played by development, direct instruction, and experience in the development of skill in this kind of writing.

Various terms are used for the kind of writing which argues a case: *thesis/support essay* (Applebee, 1984); *exposition* (Martin & Rothery, 1981); *persuasive writing* (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1986a, 1986b); *opinion essay* (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982). The terms *argumentative*, *persuasive*, and *argumentative/persuasive* are used interchangeably both in the study conducted in fourteen countries by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) (Connor et al., 1987) and in assessments conducted in the United Kingdom by the Assessment of Performance Unit of the National Foundation of Educational Research (APU) (Gorman, White, Brooks, MacLure, & Kispal, 1988). Sometimes a broad definition is adopted: "written persuasive discourse . . . integrates the rational and affective appeals and the appeals to credibility . . . [A]rgumentation is a part of persuasion" (Connor et al., 1987, p. 185). Sometimes the definition is narrower: writing that has a hierarchical, analytic structure and that requires critical arguments to be systematically supported (Applebee, 1984, p. 87). For this paper, persuasive/argumentative writing is considered to be writing that takes a point of view and supports it with either emotional or logical appeals.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN PERSUASIVE/ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

Information about students' performance in persuasive/argumentative writing is derived both from controlled studies of writing ability and from descriptions of writing students have done in response to persuasive assignments.

Studies of Persuasive/Argumentative Writing

Studies in various countries have reported poorer performance in persuasive/ argumentative writing than in narration. National assessments in the United States have consistently found poor performance in persuasive writing, performance in the 1984 assessment, for example, being described as "dismaying" (Applebee et al., 1986a, 1986b). In the United Kingdom, major assessments of the writing of 11- and 15-year-olds conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research, found better performance on narrative writing than on persuasive writing for both age groups, though the difference was not great (Gorman et al., 1988). In Ontario, Pringle and Freedman (1985) examined the ability of students in grades 5, 8 and 12 in two school boards to satisfy minimal criteria in writing narratives and arguments; at all grade levels, the number satisfying minimal criteria was higher for narrative than for argument.

A few studies have compared argumentative writing across age or grade levels, examining linguistic variables (Crowhurst, 1978, 1980, 1987), language functions (Craig, 1986) or structural elements (McCann, 1989). Syntactic complexity, measured by T-unit and clause length, is greater in argument than in narrative or descriptive writing, and greater for older than younger students (Crowhurst, 1978, 1980).

Crowhurst (1987) studied the cohesive devices used in argument by students in grades 6, 10 and 12, and found older students more often used synonyms and collocation—signifying more extensive vocabularies and a greater tendency to elaborate ideas. She found also heavy use of immature conjunctives (e.g., so, but) by grade 6 student, whereas those in grade 12 used a wider range (e.g., therefore, first of all, for one thing, all in all, finally, however, on the other hand).

Craig (1986) examined language functions used in arguments by students in grades 6 and 11. Grade 6 compositions differed from grade 11 compositions in two ways: they tended to inform rather than to persuade, and they made greater use of the relational function, specifically, asserting positive opinions (e.g., "I think this is a great idea"), requests for opinion (e.g., "Don't you agree?") and incidental

conversational expressions (e.g., "So there!")—all more characteristic of speech than of the more formal style of written argument.

McCann (1989) compared the structure of arguments by students at grades 6, 9 and 12. He found the use of claims (generalizations or assertions that something is true) increased steadily from grade to grade, as did warrants (explanations of why data support the claim).

Descriptions of Persuasive/Argumentative Writing

When asked to persuade, most 10- to 12-year-olds write pieces that are recognizably persuasive (arguments), but other kinds of responses (non-arguments) are sometimes made.

Arguments

Persuasive compositions by young students often deviate characteristically from expected forms. The descriptions below are based on approximately 1200 compositions by students in grades 5, 6 and 7 in several different studies (Crowhurst 1978, 1980, 1983). Supporting information comes mainly from White's papers on the APU assessments in the United Kingdom (Gorman et al., 1988; White, 1989).

Length. Young writers' arguments are relatively brief. Opening position-taking statements are usually of the "I think . . ." or the "No, I don't think . . ." variety, with little elaboration of the topic and with baldly stated, unelaborated reasons that often sound like a list, as in Example 1.

Example 1 (Grade 6)

No, I don't think this would be a very good trip for my class because some people cannot canoe, and some people might drown. There would be too many rocks to carry your canoe over. There wouldn't be enough canoes.

It would be better if it was in a semi-wilderness environment. They don't have enough food supply for all of them. They wouldn't be any place to put up their tent. They would have to take warm clothes or they might freeze in the night. There wouldn't be any bunk houses.

Conclusions. Compositions often lack concluding statements (see Example 1). Conclusions, if used, are usually either an appeal ("So please paint the colour of the walls brown." "So please let us have pools. DECIDE QUICK!"), a statement repeating the writer's opinion ("That's why I think the gym should be bigger"), or a terminating remark not

appropriate to a persuasive composition ("That's about it." "Thanks for your attention"). Only superior opinion writing in the 1988 B.C. assessment included a concluding summary or restatement, and then only in grades 7 and 10, not grade 4 (British Columbia Ministry of Education, Student Assessment Branch, 1989).

Organization. Compositions are not usually organized into paragraphs (Gorman et al., 1988). Rather than logical organization based on a series of points appropriately elaborated and illustrated, young writers frequently produce associative writing (Bereiter, 1980), where each successive sentence relates to the one immediately preceding (Freedman & Pringle, 1984).

Language. Young writers' vocabulary lacks diversity and precision. They monotonously use a small number of connectives (so, but, another thing, also). Sentences are short. They use expressions and structures more typical of speech.

White (1989) points out that spoken-language features give force and immediacy to some of the best writing by 11-year-olds in the APU assessment. However, by age 15 good writers depended less on conventions of speech and more on text-forming devices of written language (Gorman et al., 1988).

Non-Arguments

Some young writers respond to persuasive tasks with writing not recognizably persuasive—with narratives, dialogues, or compositions that are informative but not persuasive.

Narratives. Sometimes compositions start as an argument then "drift" into narrative (Crowhurst, 1983; Wilkinson, Barnsley, Hanna, & Swann, 1980). Usually, however, narrative responses tell the story of an attempt to persuade (Crowhurst, 1983; White, 1989). Example 2 contains an argument in embryo (an opinion and a reason), but in form and function it is a narrative.

Example 2 (Grade 5)

One day while our teacher was showing us how to do our math, a boy shot an elastic band at me and I happen to be in a committee that decides what kind of punishments the children should get for breaking the rules of the class. I thought that he should get garbage duty for two weeks because that would teach him not to shoot elastic bands any more and besides, it hurts. The teacher is in the committee too except we had a substitute that day.

So I tried to convince her that my punishment would work, but she

wouldn't hear of it. Finally I convinced her and the boy didn't shoot any more elastics. (At least not in school.)

Sometimes the argument is more fully developed, with the narrative beginning and ending serving as a framework as in Example 3.

Example 3 (Grade 7)

I am on the school committee and we decide punishments for kids who misbehave. One of today's decisions was to decide what should happen to Fred Jones because he was taking advantage of his substitute teacher and he was also shooting things around the class. The committee met in the library. I was first to talk so I stood up and said, I think Fred Jones should have his parents phoned and should have to write 250 lines telling why he shouldn't flick things at people and excluded from any activities he's in for 1 month. I think he deserves these punishments because he could of seriously hurt someone, and he knows he shouldn't take advantage of a substitute teacher. The rest of the committee agreed to my punishments and phoned his parents and enforce the punishments the next day.

Perhaps the student used the more familiar narrative structure as a way of easing into an unfamiliar kind of writing.

Dialogues. A second kind of non-argument young writers produce is a conversational exchange between two people having a disagreement (Crowhurst, 1983; White, 1989), as in Example 4. Children's experience of oral language clearly influences such compositions: a persuasive composition, they seem to think, is like an oral persuasive exchange translated into written language.

Example 4 (Grade 6)

"You mean to say you don't like camping," I said.

"No I don't. I hate being outside."

"You must be crazy. The fresh air and sunshine is good for you."

"What I really hate is the bugs," she said.

"They aren't that bad if you put on repellant."

"Well, what if you tip over in the canoe."

"You'll live. You can swim."

"I guess it's okay. I'll give in. I'll go camping."

Informative compositions. A third kind of non-argument informs or describes rather than trying to persuade (Craig, 1986; Crowhurst, 1983; Gorman et al., 1988). Some tasks seem particularly likely to produce

informative writing. When asked to decide how a misbehaving classmate should be punished and to persuade the teacher to agree (Crowhurst 1978, 1980, 1983), several grade 5 and grade 6 writers concentrated on the first part of the task (describing an appropriate punishment) and gave little or no attention to trying to persuade. Possible reasons for this kind of response are that describing may be easier than giving reasons or may be more common than persuasive writing for elementary students, or that the constraints of a two-part writing task are too great.

Summary

Studies and descriptions of student performance on persuasive/argumentative tasks permit some tentative conclusions. First, evidence across studies suggests that performance on persuasive writing is not as good as performance on narrative writing. Second, there is notable improvement in performance between elementary and upper secondary grades, although many twelfth-graders' performance remains poor.

Characteristic problems of young and/or poor writers include content, structure, and language. Compositions tend to be short and to lack content, especially appropriate support for opinions. They are poorly organized, revealing a lack of knowledge about argument structure. They are marked by inappropriate and immature language.

Most of the information on poor performance presented above comes from large-scale assessments or controlled studies with assigned tasks. Assuming that an attempt to persuade implies both a commitment to a position and a desire to convince someone, one may question whether assigned topics are likely to produce students' best efforts. Assignments to persuade make-believe audiences about topics of peripheral interest to the writers involve special difficulties. Large-scale assessments and controlled research studies are inevitably a-rhetorical and a-contextual. They give limited information on carefully limited questions. The information thus acquired is useful, but the limitations of such studies should be considered when judging students' abilities.

QUESTIONS OF DIFFICULTY AND DEVELOPMENT

Evidence suggests that persuasive/argumentative writing is poorly done by many students throughout the school system. Theoretical explanations for the presumed difficulty of argument derive from cognitive psychology. One view, based on Piagetian psychology, holds that producing argument is cognitively more demanding than producing

narrative, which is easier because its structure resembles the chronological structure of external reality (Bereiter, 1980; Freedman & Pringle, 1984; Moffett, 1968; Wilkinson et al., 1980). A second view, deriving from schema theory, holds that children lack a schema for written argument (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982). Children first learn the textual structures of speech. Narrative, which has a closed structure and does not need interaction with an interlocutor, transfers readily from speech to writing, but structures more heavily dependent on the input of an interlocutor do not transfer as easily from speech to writing and are therefore acquired later.

The writing of formal argument places heavy cognitive demands on the writer. The organization of argument is more difficult than the chronological order typical of narrative. Generating content is also more difficult. Story writers have great freedom to select appropriate content from an extensive body of experiential knowledge. Relevant content for making an argument is more restricted and less accessible because stored in scattered nodes in memory. Generating content is especially difficult for universal topics or issues of public policy which require specialized knowledge and vocabulary removed from students' usual experience. Finally, argument requires an ability to abstract and to generalize, particularly for universal topics and general audiences. Writing arguments, then, presents both cognitive difficulties and difficulties associated with lack of experience and lack of knowledge.

Argument's reliance on linguistic resources not readily available to young students supports the view that writing arguments is a developmental, age-related ability. Argument characteristically has longer clauses and T-units than narration, is typified by more complex constructions such as nominalizations, and depends on logical connectives to signal relationships between sentences. Ability in all of these areas increases with age.

Argumentation has often been thought too difficult for young writers, narrative and expressive writing seeming more appropriate (e.g., Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975; Moffett, 1968). Certainly, argument has not commonly been assigned in elementary schools (Gorman et al., 1988). Recently, however, influential voices have challenged the view that this kind of writing is not appropriate for younger students (Martin & Rothery, 1981; Newkirk, 1987, 1989; White, 1989; Wilkinson, 1986). There are various reasons for this.

In the first place, persuasive/argumentative assignments vary in difficulty. In the 1983 National Assessment (Applebee et al., 1986b), for example, 25% of fourth graders wrote an "adequate" letter persuading Aunt May on an issue of personal concern, but only 4% produced

adequate texts when the task was to convince the principal to change a school rule—a task requiring more general arguments.

A second argument is that persuasion is a natural form of discourse for children. Wilkinson (1986) claims that it is one of two “natural or universal genres rooted in the human psyche” (p. 137), the other being narrative. Moreover, recent evidence indicates very young children use precursors of argumentative writing (Martin & Rothery, 1981; Newkirk, 1987, 1989).

White (1989) calls for a reinterpretation of the data on young students’ performance. Most 11-year-olds’ compositions in the APU assessment showed at least minimal knowledge of written argument. Rather than concentrating solely on ways in which students’ writing fails to conform to adult norms, interpretations should consider what students’ writing reveals about their competence. What is needed is “an incremental viewpoint which examines the approximations children *successfully* attempt” (Newkirk, 1987, p. 142).

Such an approach could lead to appropriate valuation of characteristics of young students’ persuasive writing, and simultaneously point to useful instructional strategies. For example, the appeals and exhortations with which persuasive pieces often end suggest oral language patterns, and lack of knowledge of more customary ways of concluding written arguments—but they also indicate knowledge that pieces of writing customarily have some kind of conclusion. Instruction can use such information as a base from which to extend students’ knowledge.

A final argument against the view that persuasive/argumentative writing is too difficult for young students derives from recent evidence that context powerfully affects students’ writing (Crowhurst, 1989; Heath & Branscombe, 1985; Newkirk, 1989; Teale, 1982). Students write better when they write for real audiences and on issues that really concern them.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Influential voices urge the importance of teaching argumentative writing (Dixon & Stratta, 1986; Martin & Rothery, 1981; White, 1989; Wilkinson, 1986). Several lines of evidence suggest that persuasive/argumentative writing should not be restricted to the secondary years: (a) persuasive uses of language appear early in spoken language; (b) precursors of argument appear in the writing of young children; (c) even poor persuasive writing in the pre-teen years presents knowledge of and embryonic forms of argument; and (d) abundant opportunities

for contextually relevant writing about controversial topics arise in the classroom, in the school, and in society.

If students are to learn to write argument, they cannot be left alone to write what they will. They will not add the forms and structures of written argument to their repertoires unless they meet them. On the other hand, it is not enough to instruct students in the structures and linguistic forms of argument and to provide assignments for practice. Assigned topics are not likely to produce in students the commitment to a position that they will need if they are to write effectively. Effective teacher intervention will consist of providing opportunities to practice contextually relevant writing, and giving instruction to students, individually or in groups, when they are ready to profit from it. The following points are to be noted:

1. Topics should be important to students.
2. Students should be encouraged to direct their persuasive writing to teachers, classmates, principals and others, and to select issues they feel strongly about.
3. To clarify their thoughts, students should engage in large- and small-group discussions of issues, and should do pre-writing in which they mull over the issue in question.
4. Students should not only write—they should also read persuasive/argumentative writing. Students will more easily acquire appropriate linguistic forms and structures of argument if they are exposed to models of them. Discussion of such readings should cover both content and structure.

CONCLUSION

Evidence suggests that students do less well writing argument than writing narrative or writing descriptive reports. Reasons for poorer performance in argument are complex and interactive. In some ways argument is more cognitively demanding. It characteristically uses linguistic forms not mastered early in life. Young students lack an appropriate schema for the organizational structure of written argument. They do not *read* argumentative writing and therefore have little opportunity to acquire either the organizational structures or the linguistic forms that typify formal argumentation. They are not usually encouraged to *write* argument—especially in the elementary school—either because it is judged too difficult, or because expressive writing is more highly valued.

While student performance on persuasive/argumentative writing has

generally been regarded as disappointing, more positive interpretations are being made by teachers and researchers who focus on students' achievements rather than their failures. These practitioners find that young students show the beginnings of understanding what is required in writing persuasively. This basic understanding and students' natural interest in persuading can and should be developed throughout the school years.

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