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A Call for Something Better: Classrooms as Foundations of Respectful Argument for Civic Engagement

by Mark Dziedzic, Bryn Orum, and Linda Denstaedt



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The presidential campaign and fallout from the election of 2020 will surely go down as a low point in American politics, though it shouldn't surprise anyone paying attention to the de-evolution of respectful public argument. More unfortunate is that this display is representative of the "argument culture" our young people inhabit every day. We live in a world of algorithmic echo chambers: meme culture, caricatures, and misrepresentations—if not outright lies—that speak to those who will agree, a ready audience who likes, retweets, and subscribes. The more one denigrates those who disagree, the more likely it is that one's social media post will gain traction and go viral. It doesn't have to be this way.

Schools are not responsible for getting us to this point, though schools are not blameless. Susan Stern, a Greater Madison Writing Project Teacher Consultant authored the poem "Former Police Officer Badge #1087" (2020) modeling the kind of reflection and questions that education in America must confront. In her poem, Stern writes to Derek Chauvin—the Minneapolis police officer who murdered George Floyd—and asks: "Who were your teachers?" Instead of distancing herself from the pain and ownership of racism, Stern

tries to find herself in it. In this time of finding ourselves as a nation, we ought to look closely at our teaching, as well as the education system's role in cultural and systemic racism, oppression, and inequality. Classrooms can cultivate respectful habits of engagement and equip young people with the skills to grapple with complex issues in and out of the classroom, but we have work to do. Classrooms can and must be a place where we offer our students something better.

In the Fall 2020 edition of the Michigan Reading Journal, Cornelius Minor calls us to not pine for a return to what *was* but instead to, as Susan Stern did, sit with the reality that the "normal" had always left behind, disenfranchised, and marginalized many. He invites us to consider possibilities: "What if we did not return to normal? What if we returned to BETTER? What are the practices, approaches, and habits that we can abandon, and what are the new kid-and-community-centered structures that we can erect in their places?" (Minor and Hicks, 2020). Our nation needs community and student-centered classrooms that invite young people into public conversations and provide them with opportunities to listen, learn, and contribute.

National Writing Project's Research of Source-based Argument and Civic Engagement

Since 2013, the National Writing Project has engaged in research on The College, Career, and Community Writer's Program (C3WP) with the support of the US Department of Education's Investment in Innovation (i3) grants. The program has three components: professional development, instructional resources, and formative assessment tools. The program is designed to present new instructional practices that support students as they develop skills in source-based argument writing, all of which leads to civic and community engagement with self-selected social issues. Independent evaluations of the program during each grant cycle have demonstrated a positive, statistically significant impact on the attributes of student writing—content, structure, stance, and conventions—measured by the Analytic Writing Continuum for Source-Based Argument Writing (Gallagher et al, 2015; Arshan et al, 2018).

C3WP is designed for teacher action research and adaptation by local writing project sites, teacher-leaders, and district teachers involved in C3WP professional learning communities. The program supports teachers as they experience and implement new instructional materials and practices and formatively assess student work to determine instructional next steps. In classrooms across the nation, teachers and students enact the design principles and key practices that move learning away from the single authority of a textbook. Instead, students are invited into controversial conversations (Hess, 2009) that value the process of listening to a diversity of perspectives as well as support them as they engage with critical literacies, ultimately leading toward active participation and civic engagement in their communities (Friedrich, 2017; Friedrich et al., 2018; Gallagher, et al., 2015; National Writing Project, 2020).

Exploring Something Better

As NWP Thinking Partners, we have worked in collaboration with dozens of Michigan and Wisconsin C3WP teachers, as well as district-sponsored professional learning communities interested in rethinking their English

and/or social studies courses. Each professional learning community worked together through multiple events for a minimum of one school year to adapt the C3WP model to their context and to provide opportunities for students to engage in public discourse beyond the classroom.

The research findings cited above—and our experiences with C3WP—confirm that we are not stuck with the current argument culture. As we redefine argument as inquiry, we seek to move from unexamined or uninformed positions into what Deborah Tannen (1999) describes as “the complex middle” of contested issues. This requires shifts in ways of being and taking up new frames of thinking. In this article, we identify five instructional practices that cultivate student-centered classrooms where young people are invited to listen, learn, and contribute to public conversations.

A Guiding Metaphor: Argument as Inquiry & Classrooms as Parlors

The Burkean Parlor, an idea introduced by philosopher and composition scholar Kenneth Burke (1974), serves as our guiding metaphor for C3WP and the culture of argument that is not only possible, but necessary, in our classrooms and in our world. He describes it this way:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (110)

The Burkean Parlor describes the “ways of being” in controversial conversations that we must strive for in our classrooms. Entering the parlor requires humility, as we acknowledge the conversations we join have been going on before we arrived and will continue after we depart. The issue is contested; discussants may agree on some of the facts, but bring different perspectives and additional information. No one is the sole expert; each brings divergent and overlapping ideas. As visitors, we participate by listening to understand instead of to respond or attack. We reflect on what we hear and how new information redirects our thinking or raises questions. We track our thinking, clarifying the relationship between perspectives and ideas. By listening we become aware of our biases before we “put in our oar.”

In contrast to so much of what we see in public discourse today, Burke contends that the purpose of joining the conversation is not to tell everyone who disagrees that they are wrong, end the discussion, repeat or summarize what has already been said, or say our part and storm out. The addition of our thinking instead advances the conversation and brings a unique understanding that would not be included if we were not there. If our classrooms are to become parlor-like, we must shift to teaching practices that cultivate the culture, skills, and abilities of our students to participate in these important conversations, and we describe the instructional shifts that some of our partner teachers made in their work during our project.

Instructional Shift #1: From Comprehension to Evolving Thinking: Iterative Reading, Writing and Discussion

In his book, *Rewriting*, Joseph Harris (2017) describes writing and thinking as “bound up in” the ideas of others. Reading, writing and discussion are mutually reinforcing practices, “bound up” in one another in C3WP. We read and listen to understand, and then we reconsider our positions on issues. We write and discuss in order to clarify, and we also track our own and others’ thinking to add to the conversation. Then, we layer in additional readings, writings and discussions. This iterative approach intertwines literacy skills and

allows us to continually add new information, reflect and track how our understanding and position is evolving as a result.

Reading in a C3WP classroom is more than knowledge acquisition. There is no “right” or “wrong” information to find while reading. Sequencing texts to gradually build complexity provides a natural scaffolding to more complex texts and nuanced thinking. Annotation strategies frame reading as conscious identification of significant information by asking questions like: *What seems most significant to you? What adds to your thinking or has you wondering?* These questions help students find convergence and divergence of ideas across texts and offer multiple lines of thinking that students can pursue in writing and discussion.

Writing in a C3WP classroom gives students the opportunity to grapple with the ideas each text brings to the conversation and encourages students to ask questions and create new connections. Simple structures like those found in *They Say / I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* (Graff & Birkenstein, 2014) support student thinking as they cite information from the text and comment to push back, connect, and/or extend with their own ideas. Reflective writing and claim building through regularly revisiting the question: *What do you think now?* also asks students to track the development of their thinking, identify and parse out what matters most to them, and articulate where they stand on the issue “at this time.”

Through discussion, students shift from being in conversation with the texts to being contributors to the conversation (McCann, 2014). “Turn and talk” opportunities as well as large group discussions all provide students an opportunity to identify meaningful information, trending ideas, and major issues, as well as to revise their thinking—and face their biases—in order to make and support claims with evidence. The C3WP classroom enables new thinking to emerge and evolve. Talk, in and of itself, becomes a rich additional text that honors student contributions as they make meaning and arrive at an informed claim; the discussion itself serves as a co-created *text of the room*.

Instructional Shift #2: From Debate to Discussion: Cultivating a Culture of Argument in a 9th Grade English Classroom

If we want our classrooms to function as parlors, we must design and teach with these goals in mind, not to mention the need to push back on and unlearn practices encouraged in the current argument culture. For argument to flourish, we must create, maintain, and nurture the conditions so students feel safe-enough to practice new skills and habits of argument.

In Greater Madison Writing Project teacher consultant Liz Mehl's 9th grade English classroom, for instance, students worked to build such an argument culture at the start of the school year with a series of bellringer activities adapted from the C3WP Identifying Arguments and Entering Conversations (National Writing Project, 2020). Using writing and discussion, students began by responding to questions with low-stakes and low-identity inquiries (*Would you rather be invisible or fly? Would you rather have a pause or rewind button for*

your life) and gradually moved to questions addressing more personal and highly-contested issues (*What should the school's cell phone policy be? Is a tax on sugary drinks discriminatory or a public good?*)

Following writing and discussion, students were invited to think metacognitively about their experiences: *What did it feel like to agree / disagree with your peers? How was today's question different from yesterday's? What made your discussion enjoyable or productive?* Throughout the series of activities, students experience, reflect, notice, and name what constitutes engaging and respectful arguments. Mehl's students ended the week co-creating descriptions of the classroom argument culture they developed and wanted to maintain using Google's Jamboard (See Figure 1). The development and enactment of this culture of argument was essential in allowing the class to move on to contemporary and contested issues such as proposals for free college or forgiveness of college debt as well as calls for social justice and defunding the police.

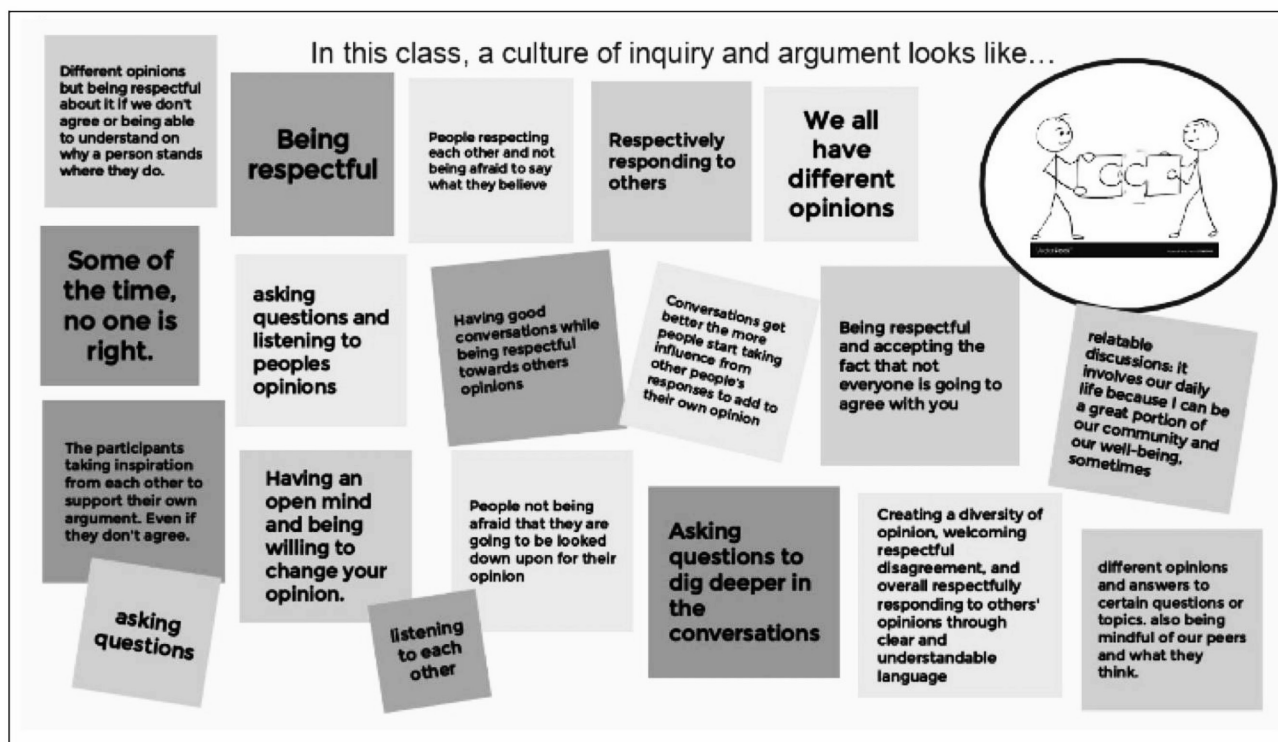


Figure 1. Classroom Culture. A Jamboard Slide on which Mehl's Students Describe a "Culture of Inquiry and Argument" (Image courtesy of Liz Mehl)

Instructional Shift #3: From Covering Content to Engaging in Inquiry: Re-visioning Eighth Grade Geography

Cultivating argument in our classrooms requires not only a shift in culture, but also a shift in thinking about what and how students learn course content. In short, we believe that young people deserve to be a part of current, complex, and controversial conversations. We have seen classrooms across the nation confront issues ranging from confederate monuments to driverless cars, facial-recognition software to voting by mail, school nutrition to dollar stores' impacts on communities. These issues often reveal systemic inequities, discrimination, and oppression; understanding the roots of these issues is essential for participation in a democratic society.

Identifying the contested issues appropriate for the class thus delineates the parameters for the questions that students will grapple with, as well as the kinds of arguments they will be able to make. Not everything is arguable; for instance, we worked to help them understand that we can argue about what solutions are most effective for addressing climate change, but not argue about the existence of climate change. Inviting students to argue about proven facts can be counterproductive, giving way to elevating falsehoods and conspiracy theories (Tannen, 1999); this is a trend in the teaching of argument writing that we must actively work to counteract.

Further, we cannot ignore the overarching idea that our current culture entertains debates that, ultimately, dehumanize individuals and communities while allowing speech rooted in hate and oppression. It should go without saying that such demeaning debates have no place in classrooms. If we ignore this, we minimize the problem, its prevalence, and the real-world implications; we can counteract and push back by simply saying *"That is not up for discussion here."* It is important to recognize—and teach our students to recognize—what constitutes a contested issue. Then, we can engage in argument so youth will notice, name, and push back against discourse that seeks to elevate hate, discrimination, and oppression.

Greater Madison Writing Project teacher consultants Jeannine Griffith, Colleen Schmidt, and Marah Larson's 8th grade Geography courses exemplifies such a shift. During their work with C3WP, the team transitioned from an emphasis on content acquisition to a new vision for student learning experiences focused on contested issues. The team changed from general aspects of physical and human geographies for regions of the world to using current and contested issues within a region to explore how the physical geography, cultures, and history impact decision making and potential solutions to local and regional issues. Examples include shifting a unit on the Caribbean to a compelling question about American colonialism (*Should Puerto Rico become the 51st state?*) a unit on South American unit to a compelling question about climate change (*What should be done about deforestation of the Amazon Rainforest?*), and an Eastern European unit to a compelling question about a specific regional conflict throughout history (*How can Russia and Ukraine come to a peaceful resolution over the Crimean Peninsula?*). By designing their units around contested issues, the team saw students' skills in argument increase, as well as their content knowledge. During a conference presentation, the team shared the point that "the route to the complex middle is initially uncomfortable, but now it's just the way we think about teaching" (Schmidt et al., 2019).

Instructional Shift #4: From Textbooks to Text Sets: Engaging with Complex Public Conversations

Shifting from a focus on "content acquisition" to one that instead values recursive reading, writing, and talking that gradually moves deeper into a public conversation on a contested issue, we have discovered that this can make all the difference. But it can't happen unless individuals, as well as groups of teachers (and, in turn, entire school cultures) rethink the texts that students read and, more importantly, the purpose for reading. Reading to acquire content leads to knowledge of an approved kind. On the other hand, reading to become informed on a contested issue—with multiple legitimate perspectives and solutions—leads to organizing one's thinking in different ways, making sense of the various perspectives, meanings, and individuals who have a stake in the issue. Becoming informed

requires students to experience text sets that disrupt the notion that any one text—or textbook—has authority over the entirety of the argument (Monte-Sano et al., 2014; Smagorinsky, 2014; Wineburg et al., 2012). A collection of texts provides an opportunity to hear from individuals, groups, and perspectives that might be marginalized, silenced, or otherwise omitted.

Our current argument culture most frequently presents issues as having two opposing sides: a debate of pro/con views. Argument writers learn to choose a side, write a claim, and find evidence to support it. Another approach shows that a balanced argument—one that addresses both sides, appearing aware of counter-perspectives—can be more generative, yet might still fall

victim to what has been called “both sides-ism.” Each of these two approaches generally sustains a simple, dichotomous view and may ultimately create confirmation bias as writers support prior beliefs. As an alternative, C3WP text sets give voice to multiple perspectives and stakeholders, serving as a model for engaging with social issues for equity and justice, as shown in Figure 2.

When C3WP teachers design text sets, they ask key questions: *Who is in the conversation? Who ought to be? What is the best way to hear from them?* As a result, designers look for non-traditional classroom texts to provide access to voices, ideas, authors, and publishers that might be overlooked. The result is a carefully curated collection that accurately captures a public conversation about an issue and might be composed of news articles, op-eds, editorials, videos, infographics, tweets, blog posts, graphs, or images.

For example, the contested issue of how and why dollar stores have populated the American landscape, especially in low-income communities (from the C3WP “Organizing Evidence” unit, National Writing Project, 2020) serves as an example of a “multiple perspectives” text set; as such, it helps expand students’ thinking around an issue while also developing critical literacies. This set is designed with texts from a variety of national and local news agencies and stakeholders. It begins with information about the rapid growth of dollar stores with cheap prices in areas without access to a supermarket chain. It adds texts to elaborate on the potential—and problematic—aspects of the stores

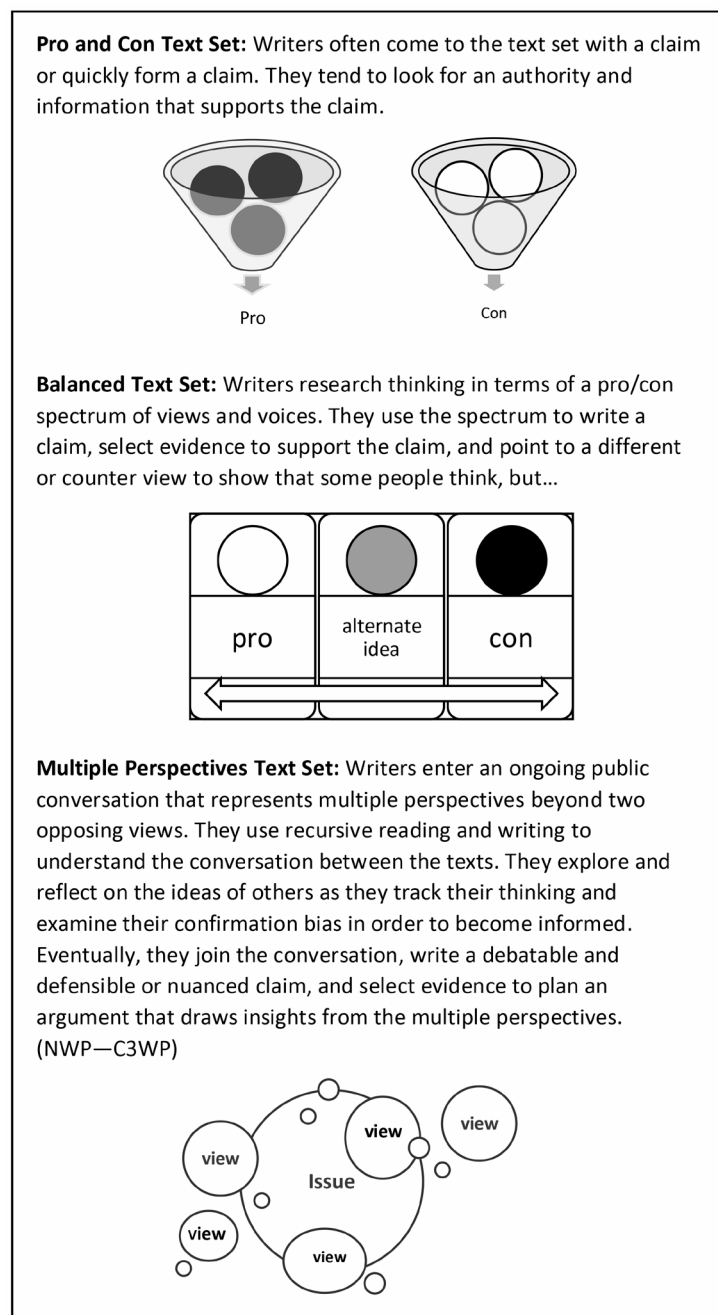


Figure 2. Text Set Designs from the College, Career, and Community Writers Program (Image courtesy of the National Writing Project)

from multiple stakeholders: rural, urban and suburban customers; city governments; health agencies; dollar store chains and their stockholders. Then, the text set adds one more layer of complexity pushing the conversation into a less visible social justice impact—the fight against food deserts. Without becoming aware of the multiple perspectives, students would be in danger of seeing dollar stores simply as a million-dollar industry providing convenience and marketing inexpensive products. They could easily miss the discussion of the inequities, the impact on areas of high poverty or racial segregation, and underlying issues of social justice that make the issue more complex and nuanced.

Instructional Shift #5: From “to and for Your Teacher” to “to and for Your People” in 12th grade English

Putting your oar into the conversation is a basic metaphor for a C3WP classroom. Listening, reflecting, and becoming aware of bias are all part of knowing when and how to put your oar in. It is also the essence of being civically-engaged citizens in a democratic society. A year ago at an NWP partnership meeting, we were introduced to *Heavy*, a memoir by Kiese Laymon (2019). In the text, Laymon reflects on a conversation with his mentor who redirects his writing, calling him to write “to and for our people.” The conversation led him to realize that “No one ever taught me to write to and for my people. They taught me... to write to and for my teachers” (p. 85). In this spirit, we contend that C3WP classrooms build skills and dispositions that culminate in opportunities for young people to write “to and for their people,” not just for their teachers.

Located in a suburb of Detroit, Leah Barnett, Oakland Writing Project teacher consultant, also wanted students to go beyond writing for the teacher. After integrating C3WP into her junior ELA course, she designed a full semester-long course for seniors so students had time to identify and explore contested issues that mattered to them. They collected and curated texts that explored multiple perspectives and came from stakeholders. Students also researched local needs, challenges, inequities, and avenues for actions, all of which might stimulate change or make an impact. Throughout the process, they tracked their evolving thinking

and sought new ideas. They asked themselves: *What could be done to solve this problem? How can I convince others to join me or care about my call to action?*

Most important, Barnett’s students took action. They formulated and designed a service project that offered tangible results. The students focused on creating authentic products that informed and argued for support of individuals and organizations. Using the C3WP “Making the Case in an Op-Ed” unit (National Writing Project, 2020), her students studied the op-ed genre, and wrote and submitted an op-ed to local papers in order to advocate for awareness on an issue that mattered to them. Their authentic projects considered a substantive challenge: what do individuals in the world *do* to create to increase awareness, raise funds, or advocate for change? As a result, they interviewed people, and they created flyers, videos, lesson plans, educational opportunities and social events, moving toward informed action (Denstaedt et al, 2014).

In past years, many of Barnett’s students focused on educational access to young people. For instance, Gayle and Charlie connected with schools and organizations that provided after-school opportunities to young people in Detroit. Gayle recruited classmates to join her twice a week to tutor, lead students in craft-making, help with reading groups and organize games at an after-school program in a public school in Detroit. As one example, they made “dream jars” for the students.



Figure 3. Photo of Students’ dream jars (Photo courtesy of Leah Barnett’s student, Gayle)

After reading *The BFG* by Roald Dahl (1982), Gayle and her classmates invited students to share a dream, and they wrote it down, placing those dreams in the decorated jars so the “big friendly giant” could come to share those dreams with other children (Figure 3).

Similarly, Charlie loved music and saw it as a gift. His local research led him to Detroit Youth Volume, an organization that provides musical instruments and lessons for children who would not otherwise be able to afford to participate in music training (www.detroityouthvolume.org). He raised money, collected gently used performance clothing, sheet music, music stands, and rosins, and then donated these to the organization. Another student, Emily connected the value of her own education with emerging issues about women and power. She curated a text set to learn more about places in the world where girls did not have equal access to education, and she sought ways to remedy the problem. Designing and selling International Women’s Day t-shirts, she raised awareness within her school about the problem of inequities in education. In Figure 4, a tweet from Emily shows an image of the t-shirt design with a call to action, inviting her friends to purchase one in order to support her cause. From this, she raised close to \$1,000 for a

girl’s school in Uganda, and with this donation, she paid for three girls to have a year of education.

This year, Barnett’s students were undaunted by the challenges presented by COVID-19 and a virtual classroom. Two projects examined the situations of and acted for disenfranchised individuals. Samantha worked to increase access to counseling and shelter for victims of rape and domestic abuse. She collaborated with a local yoga instructor and organized a virtual course in yoga and mindfulness training. She invited women to build self-esteem and lower stress by attending virtual classes. Samantha donated the proceeds to a local women’s shelter. Another student, Ellie, shared thinking about the injustice of bullying, and this led her to examine the exclusion of people with disabilities. Like other students, she raised funds to donate to the Special Olympics, hoping to enable more athletes to participate in this inclusive and confidence-building activity. However, she didn’t stop there; she made informational videos featuring people with disabilities talking about their experience as Special Olympians; the digital flyers she made to begin her campaign will live beyond this semester’s work.

Conclusion: Something Better in Your Community

We often share the Laymon “to and for your people” passage in professional learning communities as an invitation to cultivate the kind of reflection and ownership exemplified by Susan Stern’s question: “Who were your teachers?” Our students—and our nation—need teachers, classrooms, and schools that prioritize opportunities for students to write to and for their people, not just a grade.

Just as Cornelius Minor (2020) calls on us to respond to the moment and build something better for our students and our communities, Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze (2011) call for us to, as the title of their book suggests, “walk out” and “walk on.” Like Minor, they push us to recognize that the answer to righting broken systems is in the collective action of those willing to not walk away and, instead, walking out of what isn’t working and, in community, walking on to something better. With the core belief that community



Figure 4. Screenshot of Emily’s tweet announcing the t-shirt sale (Photo courtesy of Leah Barnett’s student, Emily)

is always the answer, we offer the following ways to listen, connect, and respond, to “walk on” and to the create something better in your classroom, school, and community:

- **Professional Community:** While we have shared the core instructional shifts that teachers can make in individual classrooms, it is critical to note that the shifts the teachers in this article made were enabled by their participation in sustained, supportive, and growth-minded professional learning cohorts. Just as literacies are “bound up” in one another in C3WP classrooms, the deepest enactment of C3WP instructional shifts are “bound up” in professional learning, instructional resources, and formative assessment practices. Professional learning networks are a necessity, and we invite you to find your local writing project and connect with the National Writing Project online (nwp.org).
- **Classroom Community:** Literacy is a tool we can use to engage with and understand the world as it was, as it is, and as it could be. Let’s use all that literacy—and literacies—can offer us to interrogate the world we see, and to dream of the world we desire and deserve. Tweets, news articles, blogs, videos, infographics and other forms of multimodal text deserve a place in our assignment design. In that sense, we need to develop the culture, teach the skills, and provide the opportunities for students to engage with contested issues in our classrooms. We ask that you review your course content and texts, knowing that you are providing your students with opportunities to understand current, complex, contested issues. If students are to navigate the world of information, they should learn the skills to do so in our classrooms.
- **Global and Local Community:** Finally, classrooms should be places for students to build skills and practice new ideas; students also deserve opportunities to write, talk, and think with authentic public audiences about the issues that matter most to them. Writing a source-based argument for an authentic audience is a call to action, an act of hope that readers will pause, reconsider, and see the strengths of views different from their own. These

habits then help young writers make meaning of the world and provide an opportunity to see that their words can have power. Knowing this, young writers can be the change their community needs in the moment, and they can be the single voice lifted among the many, a voice that will push back and push forward in response to social issues.

We invite you to learn with and from your students, welcoming them to both enter the academic conversation and move those arguments into the real world, building better communities through the work that you do together.

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