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Argument Writing Advanced Institute: Teaching Teachers the Benefits of the C3WP

JESSICA MOMAN AND STEFFANY COMFORT MAHER

In 2013, while states all over the U.S. were adopting the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), Indiana opted to create and adopt its own new standards. However, the Indiana literacy standards emphasized argumentative writing over the formerly emphasized persuasive writing, similar to the CCSS. Teachers across the country (in and beyond Indiana) were unprepared for this switch in writing focus, and many felt their students were not educated to master the depth of the new standards (Gewertz, 2014). Argumentative writing requires critical, complex thinking. Many teachers were wondering: How can we help students make this transition in their thinking and writing? What have we used in the past that would still work, and what would we need to change in order to meet the depth of knowledge students need for this new writing genre focus?

I was one of those Indiana teachers. I struggled the first year my state adopted these new standards. At that time, I had been teaching for six years and was in my second year of teaching 7th grade English language arts in a suburban, 6-8 middle school in southern Indiana. Over 50% of my students qualified for free or reduced lunch, 15% were identified as students in need of special education services, and nearly 10% were English language learners. I did not know how to move my students toward the kind of critical reading, analysis, and synthesis of information necessary for the new literacy standards, let alone empower them to evolve this critical reading into argumentative writing.

Thankfully, I had recently participated in a summer institute offered by my local National Writing Project (NWP) site. The NWP is built upon the teachers-teaching-teachers model, and research shows this model is the most effective for teacher training (Heitin, 2016). Not surprisingly, then, my summer institute time had shaped the way I taught writing, but that training still left some gaps, specifically within teaching argumentative writing. When my local NWP site offered a summer training on using newly-released argumentative writing units in the classroom, I eagerly signed up. The

College, Career, and Community Writers Program (C3WP) was just what I had been looking for. What I gained from that week was more than just ideas for argumentative writing; I walked away with ideas that would completely change the way I teach all writing genres. In fact, I learned so much that I now partner with my National Writing Project (NWP) site to teach an Advanced Institute (AI) specifically on argumentative writing for teachers.

During a week-long Advanced Institute (AI), we have two goals: 1) explaining and demonstrating the rationale and benefits of using the College, Career, and Community Writers Program (C3WP) units and 2) providing coaching for teachers to create their own units to use in their classrooms. Here, I will focus on the first goal, with special emphasis on the teacher benefits of implementing the C3WP in the classroom.

Benefits of the C3WP

In the advanced institute, we showcase some of the most important C3WP benefits.

1. Not Just for English Language Arts

The first point emphasized during the advanced institute is that all teachers across the disciplines have an argumentative writing strand in their content standards. The C3WP lessons are organized and explained so well that any teacher, whether they have experience teaching literacy or not, can teach the lessons and see success in student writing.

Sixth grade social studies teacher and AI participant Katie Carlisle states, “I created a text set on Black Death during my time in AI. Engaging students with an authentic text set and direct mini-lesson support provides another opportunity to experience real-world writing” (Carlisle, personal interview, 2019). Carlisle contends that the C3WP website is user-friendly for any teacher, “even those without writing experience” (2019).

2. Mini-Units That Are Truly Mini

One of my favorite aspects of the C3WP mini-units is just that—they are mini. Most units can be taught within 7-10 days. In my experience, students lose interest in most topics after two weeks, so any unit that extends longer than two weeks poses a struggle for teachers to continue to engage students. I now keep all of my writing units to a two-week limit, regardless of genre—narrative, informational, and argumentative.

With that said, I also know my students need repetition before they master any skill. Thus, I follow C3WP guidelines regarding “cycles of writing” by teaching four two-week mini-units for argumentative writing. This gives students multiple opportunities to read and discuss nonfiction sources, practice using the skills taught in each mini-unit, and build on the attribution of authors (the focus of argumentative writing for middle school). If teachers’ pacing guides focus on argument writing within one quarter, they might consider teaching three to four C3WP mini-units within one quarter. For teachers (like me) who have flexibility in their pacing, I encourage one mini-unit each quarter, allowing the opportunity for cyclical review for this writing genre.

In my school district, I work with a transient population, so keeping the mini-units under two weeks has an added benefit because it also allows me to work with students who move into the district during a unit. If we are close to the beginning of the unit, they can jump in with the rest of the students. If our class is working on completing a unit, I can sit with new students and focus on how we read, annotate, and discuss texts. I no longer have to figure out what to do with students when they move in on week three of a five-week unit.

3. Teacher-Curated Text Sets

When I was new to the teaching profession, I heard over and over again, “Give students choice, and it will engage them.” I agree, but for some students, too much freedom is overwhelming. The C3WP mini-units, however, provide a good balance between student choice and teacher-friendly curriculum. Teachers pair the mini-units with an NWP- and/or teacher-curated text set, which includes articles, videos, infographics, and images, representing a range of perspectives (beyond pro/con) on a specific topic. For example, one of my students’ favorite topics is reality television. After reading and discussing articles, videos, and infographics that cover some benefits of reality television, such as how watching

MasterChef Junior (2018) can be a rewarding family activity, and some disadvantages, such as the programming being too mature for teens, students then create their own claims about reality television and select evidence from the text set that is best suited to their perspective.

As a result of the C3WP, I now assess actual argument writing, not the quality of research students did or did not conduct. Best of all, my students’ writing is stronger because they no longer begin the writing process by choosing claims and THEN finding resources to support them. Instead, they discover a claim (beyond pro/con) by FIRST reading, analyzing, and writing about all the sources in a text set. In other words, students research BEFORE they write a claim, and the claim is debatable, defensible, and nuanced—a new concept for most English teachers. Equally important, the C3WP provides an assessment tool known as the Using Sources Tool (UST) that provides the platform to conduct formative assessment of student writing, both individually and as a large group. The UST streamlines the review process and helps guide teachers to determine the “next steps” for instruction.

4. Teacher-Chosen Pathways

However, the C3WP is not a prescribed curriculum. The mini-units are divided into “Upper Elementary” and “Secondary,” and teachers can choose their own paths through the lessons and materials based on their students’ needs. For example, my students tend to struggle with connecting evidence to claims, but some of my students are two to three grade levels behind in reading and writing. The C3WP provides the flexibility for me to choose secondary text sets, but utilize the mini-lessons in the elementary section, which my students find relevant and accessible. So my students read *Chew On This* (Wilson & Schlosser, 2007) from the secondary section, but we utilize the elementary instructional resources for the “Connecting Evidence to Claim” mini-unit. Once my students have mastered that skill at a basic level, then we move to a deeper practice of the skill in the secondary instructional resources.

Conclusion

Teaching argumentative writing can be overwhelming. When I first began, I quickly realized that I needed further training in order to better teach my students how to become

strong argumentative writers. My local site of the National Writing Project equipped me with the tools I needed to empower my students, through short, scaffolded assignments, to write well. Teacher training through NWP Advanced Institutes on the College, Career, and Community Writers Program with demonstrations of lessons is powerful and provides tools to improve teaching outcomes in student argumentative writing.

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