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College, Career, and Community Writers Program (C3WP) Data-Driven Reports of Literacy Growth

KATHY J. KURTZE

It's April, and it's been a cold one, but in the minds of my middle school students, summer is right around the corner, and with it, the freedom from academics. You see it in their attire (flip flops? shorts?!) even though we've had an ice day (much needed) and several snow storms since the infamous Phil poked his head out of the burrow (eleven weeks ago!) and declared winter would be over in a mere six weeks. And of course, you see it in their actions; screaming, running, flirting, laughing fill the 5-minute hall passing time. When they finally make it to my classroom, only slightly tardy and without necessary implements for learning, it might take a minute (or ten) to settle them into classroom mode. But settle they do.

As they settle, we begin with our routine: some personal choice reading time, some discussion of what they read, some journal writing time, and—many days of the week—some argument quick writes and discussion. Last week I had one of those “this gives me goosebumps, in a good way” days. Students were working on the last stages of a short essay which was a combined-effort assignment from their history teacher and me. They were to use evidence from three of four sources to support a nuanced claim regarding what led to the downfall of the power that feudal kings held in Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries. They had one day in history class to write, after several days of reading articles and primary documents, and two days in ELA class to add to their writing as they typed it into a Google Doc. As students talked with partners about their writing, I moved my stool from student to student to sit beside them for a one-on-one conference. As I worked with individual students, my ear was also listening to what else was happening in the room. (A teacher has to, right? You never know when that high-energy kid in the corner is going to stir the class into a frenzy when he crawls on the floor and under desks en route to the pencil sharpener—it is middle school, after all...)

As I listened, I was aware that the conversations around me were exactly what we'd been working towards all year — politely stated phrases like, “I see what you're saying in this

part of the essay,” and “I like the support you used — I hadn't thought of that when I was working on mine,” and “I want you to look at my evidence and tell me if you think I ranked it from least to most important or not, and tell me why you think that,” and “This is really good! I like how you used transitions, but I'm wondering if this quote right here is really the one that you want—it doesn't sound very strong to me.” And so it went. I looked around the room in disbelief. I'm not sure why. I mean, this is what we've been doing, what I've been hoping they're learning. It was just that it struck me all at once that they *were* doing it, that they *had* made it where we were headed. I interrupted them, saying, “Boys and girls, you're awesome! You're doing it! You *get* it — your argument writing is spot-on, and I *know* you will do well on any test you are given. But better yet, you are making *me* feel like what we've been doing matters, makes a difference. You're totally awesome!” I continued my way around the room, reading and offering praise and suggestions, buoyed by the energy in the room. True, not every student has it. Yet. But the majority of them do, and I have data to prove it.

How did we get here? In 2016, the Chippewa River Writing Project (CRWP) at Central Michigan University received a Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) Grant to launch the College, Career, and Community Writers Program (then called the College-Ready Writers Program). This grant supported the work of our local National Writing Project (NWP) site in rolling out the College, Career, and Community Writers Program (C3WP) with 13 teacher consultants from ten different school districts. After our first year of working with the program, the CRWP applied for a second SEED grant, this time to bring C3WP to more teachers by providing professional development to a high-need middle or high school. When we received that grant, the Chippewa River Writing Project decided to partner with my district, inviting ten teachers to participate in a year-long professional development opportunity on the College, Career, and Community Writers Program.

We began our PD partnership in the spring of the year

prior to its implementation in classrooms. Teachers spent a full day immersed in the NWP philosophy of teachers as writers and teachers teaching teachers, while learning about the key components of the C3WP: routine argument writing, skills-based mini-units, formative assessment with the Using Sources Tool (UST) (NWP, 2016), and a cycle of instruction that includes supporting teachers with PD while they try out the C3WP in their classrooms (NWP, 2018). After this session, those in attendance committed to the endeavor. This included all of the high school and one of the middle school ELA teachers, as well as a high school mathematics teacher, a middle school history teacher, and a teacher each from second and fifth grades. (Quick aside: We hadn't intended to have a second grade teacher on board, but one of our TCs was moved from fifth grade to second just before the school year began, and there was no way we were willing to exclude her. After all, she was family! Her insight gave us invaluable evidence that the program works at any level.) In committing to the cohort, teachers agreed to implement four mini-units of the C3WP during the coming year, participate in four scoring sessions using the UST, and select ten students (stratified from high, medium, and low ability levels) whose progress they would track for the year.

To track the students' progress, we used C3WP's Using

Sources Tool (Appendix A). Unlike other rubrics that measure student writing, the UST focuses on the moves writers make with claims, evidence, and commentary. These moves are the focus of C3WP's skills-based mini-units. The UST generates

data instantly, giving teachers a clear picture of what each student is doing successfully in their writing as well as what next steps (in the form of mini-units) would help that student to improve.

Just last week, our cohort met for a fourth UST session, scored our papers using the C3WP's scale point definitions, and entered the data for each of the targeted students. Within seconds, the NWP scoring platform did its magic and gave us data for the entire district. We discussed the data, adding our scores to a previously created spreadsheet. Looking at the results projected on a screen (Table 1), we were able to see trends and talk about what we thought led to the results we were seeing.

These discussions were one of my favorite parts of the UST sessions. Like my students, we were learning to talk to each other about what we saw and give advice on what more we could do, what next steps we should take.

As a whole, the results were astounding. After our first argument writing lesson, 10% of our students could "write a claim that was nuanced, debatable, and defensible." By the fourth argument writing lesson, 42.9% could! Simi-

1. Does the writing present a claim?	October	December	February	April
The claim is nuanced, defensible and debatable.	10%	49.3%	35.6%	42.9%
2. Does the writing distinguish between the student's own ideas and the source material?	October	December	February	April
Competently	8.8%	21.7%	27.4%	31.4%
Effectively	1.3%	5.8%	21.9%	30%
3. Does the writing select and use evidence from sources to support the claim?	October	December	February	April
Competently	8.8%	13%	23.3%	35.7%
Effectively	0%	7.3%	9.6%	24.3%
4. Does the writer comment on source materials in ways that connect the source material to the claim?	October	December	February	April
Competently	3.8%	13%	20.6%	38.6%
Effectively	0%	4.4%	4.1%	7.1%
5. Does the writing characterize the credibility of the source material or author?	October	December	February	April
Competently	0%	2.9%	15.1%	22.9%
Effectively	0%	7.3%	9.6%	7.1%
6. Overall, how would you describe the writing's use of source material?	October	December	February	April
Skillfully integrates source material	0%	2.9%	4.1%	12.9%
Uses source material to support the paper's claim	3.8%	11.6%	20.6%	42.9%
Includes source material to somewhat support the paper's claim	18.8%	14.5%	17.8%	28.6%

Table 1: Results of UST Scoring for Highest Scale Points over the Course of a School Year of C3WP Implementation

larly, results from the first UST for “distinguishing between the student’s own ideas and source materials” showed that 1.3% were able to do this effectively (the highest scale point) and 8.8% could do it competently; the fourth UST showed 24.3% and 35.7% respectively. This is a total gain of 60%! Phenomenal. The trend continued for “selecting and using evidence from sources to support a claim” and “the writing characterizes the credibility of the source material or author.” There was an even larger jump in the area of argument writing that “comments on source materials in ways that connect the source material to the claim.” The first UST results showed that none of the students were able to do this effectively, but, by April, 45.7% could do so competently or effectively; what’s more, another 37.1% were developing this skill. That means that a whopping 82.8% were able to show a connection between source materials and their claim in some way. With each scoring, student writing made a clear jump up the scale points of the UST. Below are two examples of student writing from one of my seventh graders--one from her writing at the December scoring, one from her writing at the February scoring.

December Student Sample: CC-C MS Grade 7, Connecting Evidence to Claims:

Although homeopathic therapy is still a treatment, chemotherapy is more effective. A study, by Yale radiologists, examined the mortality rates of people who chose conventional treatment or alternative therapy. This showed that chemotherapy has an advantage for being more effective. Also, their research says that this treatment gives “Great Promise” and is a great choice for cancer treatment. Because this is a life-and-death situation, alternative cancer therapies can’t take chemo’s place.

February Student Sample: CC-C MS Grade 7, Connecting Evidence to Claims

Although civil rights is still a big issue, in 1960’s America it was extremely prevalent. This issue is shown in the story book, *Boycott Blues*, by Andrea Davis Pinkney, the speech, “I Have a Dream,” by Martin Luther King Jr., and the poem, “Let America be America Again,” by Langston Hughes. In their pieces we see people who were segregated standing up for their rights.

For example, Pinkney, a woman known for her books based on civil rights, states, “That was day 382, when Jim Crow flew away. He had no more power in Montgomery.” What she is saying here is that in the late 50’s the people in Montgomery were not giving up. This matters because it set off the movement for the rest of the country. Also, King, a man who fought with peace

not violence for his people, and died for what he believed in, says in his speech, “Hope of negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice.” What King was trying to portray here was that he is not going to sit and let these people who were belittled and unfairly treated be left unjustified. This matters because he was a leader for the movement on civil rights and he and his supporters were not stopping till justice was served. Furthermore, Hughes, a man who is known for his work based upon civil rights, states, “And yet must be--the land where every man free. The land that’s mine--the poor man’s, Indian’s, Negro’s, ME.” What Hughes is saying here is that this land of America is yours, mine, and ours, no matter our race or skin tone. This matters because it shows that in the 1960’s it was not just [African Americans] being wronged, it was every person who was not a rich, white man. In conclusion, civil rights was a very prevalent issue in the 1960’s as this article shows. Everyone deserves the rights that American citizens are given no matter what, and these leaders as well as many others, did not give up until justice was served. It is everyone’s responsibility to help correct the problem that is still happening almost as much as it was happening in the 1960’s. If we want everyone to be treated equally in this country we have to fight ourselves.

Reading these, you will notice that the second writing of “Connecting Evidence to Claims” was much better, more sophisticated. I chose the same next step for my students to focus on in these writings *because it was what they needed*. This is the beauty of the program: We are always looking at where to go next, not at an all-inclusive rubric that scores whether we made it or not. Instead, we ask, “We made it this far. Now, what do we need to do to go further?” And in making these steps, we continue to grow our students so that when we do stop to compare the data from scoring to scoring, or from the beginning to the end, we see the results (Figures 1, 2, and 3).

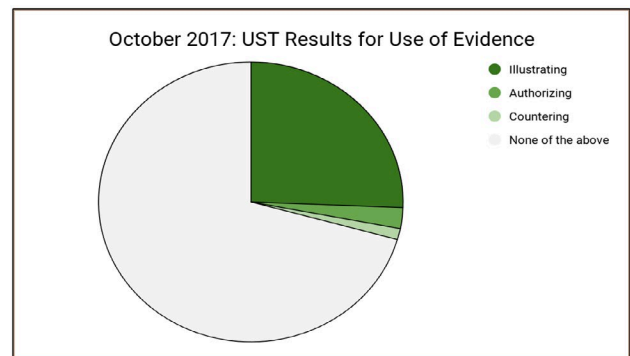


Figure 1. Use of evidence. This figure illustrates student scores in using evidence in writing in October 2017.

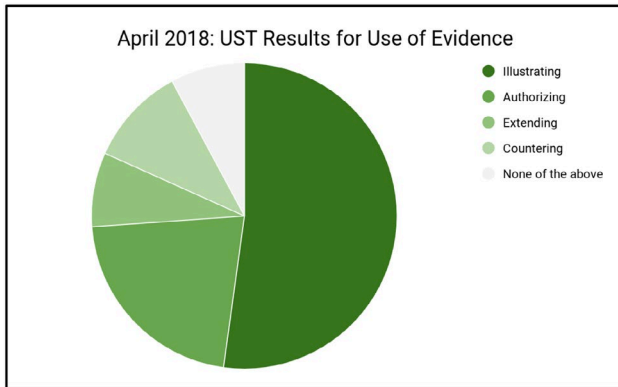


Figure 2. Use of evidence. This figure illustrates scores in using evidence in writing in April 2018 for the same cohort of students.

sustained two-week lessons that result in at least four writings to be assessed over the course of the year. My students didn't get to that "aha!" moment by having had participated in one great lesson; my students, and those in our cohort across the district, got there by continuing to write and discuss arguments. They got there by seeing arguments everywhere, by learning to look at what others said, and by joining the conversation, differentiating between their thoughts and those of the writer; they got there by having a common language to discuss their writing, by having clear expectations of what to strive for and by using small steps, like sentence stems.

I firmly believe that students of teachers who embrace and utilize the practices of C3WP are better prepared to engage in civic discourse than those who do not. In a society

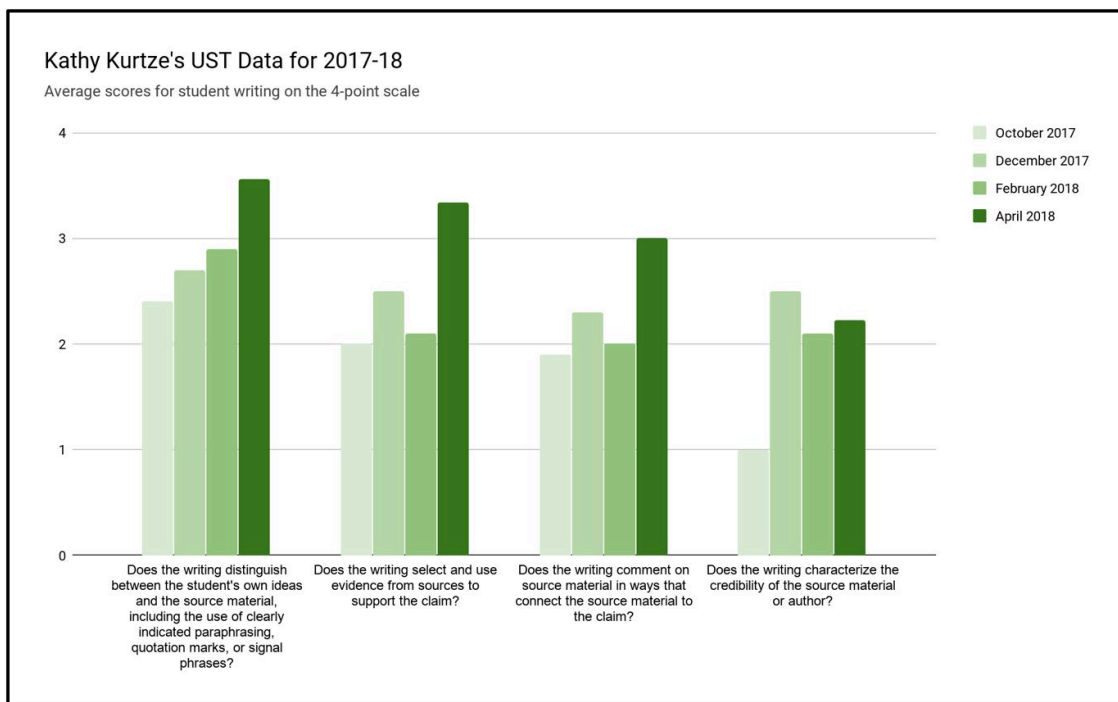


Figure 3. UST Data for Kathy Kurtze's Students. This figure illustrates the average scores over the course of the 2017-2018 school year for Kathy Kurtze's sample of 10 students.

When we looked at the data for all four scoring sessions during the year, we noticed a few things. Although there was an increase, it wasn't a steady increase each time. For many of the areas tested, the data from the first and second writings showed no change or small increases. The data from the third and fourth writings showed the larger jumps. To us, that indicated that it is the consistent, continuing aspect of C3WP that makes it work. It isn't just one or two lessons; it is a series of writings, from "quick writes" and "quick view and talks" to

where differences will always exist, and are especially prevalent right now, it is important that children are taught to read critically, be informed and respectfully acknowledge varying viewpoints before "pulling up a chair to join the conversation" (one of the C3WP mini-unit phrases) (NWP, 2018). The practices of C3WP encourage students to read with an eye for understanding that there are many ongoing conversations about any given topic and that in order to join the conversation they need to look to see what others are saying

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and continue looking. As a current classroom teacher and as a writing project co-director, it is important to me to find ways to bring C3WP practices to my school and the schools around me so that all teachers can teach argument writing in a way that the concepts of good argument reading and writing follow them through their lives. Recently, one of my seventh grade students told me she was having a discussion with her mother on which they had a disagreement, and she used the “conversation bubbles” (the sentence stems I have my students use for respectful discourse in the classroom) to talk with her mother. She then lamented, “Oh, no, I’m going to be using those conversation bubbles until I’m 90 years old!” She had used them so much that the lines between “home talk” and “school talk” were blurring. Nothing could have made me happier!

So, as I prepare another week of lessons, I am including a quick argument activity — one that is viewing and discussing only — to give them just one more example that argument is everywhere, and we can understand it and embrace it!

References

- National Writing Project (NWP) (2018). College, career, and community writers program. Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/nwp.org/c3wp/home>
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Appendix A:

The Using Sources Tool from the National Writing Project College, Career, and Community Writers Program available at <https://sites.google.com/nwp.org/c3wp/home>.

<p>1. Does the writing present a claim?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> The writing presents a claim that is nuanced, debatable and defensible.<input type="checkbox"/> The writing presents a claim that is debatable and defensible.<input type="checkbox"/> The writing presents a summary statement about source material, but that statement is not debatable.<input type="checkbox"/> The writing does not present a claim. <p>2. Does the writing distinguish between the student's own ideas and the source material, including the use of clearly indicated paraphrasing, quotation marks, or signal phrases?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Not present<input type="checkbox"/> Developing<input type="checkbox"/> Competently<input type="checkbox"/> Effectively <p>3. Does the writing select and use evidence from sources to support the claim?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Not present<input type="checkbox"/> Developing<input type="checkbox"/> Competently<input type="checkbox"/> Effectively <p>4. Does the writing comment on source material in ways that connect the source material to the claim?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Not present<input type="checkbox"/> Developing<input type="checkbox"/> Competently<input type="checkbox"/> Effectively <p>5. Does the writing characterize the credibility of the source material or author?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Not present<input type="checkbox"/> Developing<input type="checkbox"/> Competently<input type="checkbox"/> Effectively <p>6. Overall, how would you describe the writing's use of source material? <i>Select the option that best describes the writing's overall use of source material.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Skillfully integrates source material to fully support the paper's claim.<input type="checkbox"/> Uses source material to support the paper's claim.<input type="checkbox"/> Includes source material to somewhat support the paper's claim.<input type="checkbox"/> Summarizes source material, without connecting it to a claim.<input type="checkbox"/> Does not use source material.<input type="checkbox"/> Primarily or exclusively copies source material. <p>7. Does the writing use source material for any of the following purposes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Illustrating<input type="checkbox"/> Authorizing<input type="checkbox"/> Extending<input type="checkbox"/> Countering<input type="checkbox"/> None of the above <p>Comments and next steps?</p>
