From dialogue to two-sided argument:
Scaffolding adolescents' persuasive writing

Mark K. Felton, Suzanne Herko

This writing workshop used structured reading, oral debate, and reflection to strengthen students' written arguments.

Argument, debate, discussion. disagreement—most teachers would agree that these skills fall well within our students’ repertoire. Moreover, our students are frequently energized and excited by argument and will voluntarily elaborate on and defend their ideas. Yet put these same students to the task of writing a persuasive essay and much of that eloquence is lost in translation. As the National Assessment of Educational Progress’s 1998 Writing Report Card indicated, fully 55% of 12th-grade students in the United States scored below “sufficient” on a persuasive writing task. Their essays contained little more than an assertion, with limited or disorganized elaboration to support their opinion (Greenwald, Perski, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999).

What happens to the detailed explanations that we observe in our students’ real-time debate? Why do these explanations become truncated in the transition to paper? What is missing is more than the passion of an author’s voice and fluency. The persuasive essays lack the basic components of argumentative writing—components that students readily offer up in conversation. Thus the challenge for us as writing instructors is to bridge the transition from rich verbal debates to the written essay.

In the argumentative writing workshop featured in this article we attempted to do just that. As researchers from the university and high school levels, we wanted to create a multilayered learning experience that allowed many points of entry for student growth and understanding. The 36 students who participated in this workshop came from an urban public school serving a richly diverse population, and they represented a range of achievement levels and writing abilities. Our primary goal was to build on students’ oral debate skills to strengthen their written arguments. Drawing upon research in writing and critical argument, this writing workshop used structured reading, debate, and metacognitive reflection to scaffold students’ written argument. In the explanation of our workshop we first explore the research underpinnings of the learning experience and then describe the structure of the workshop itself.

Persuasive writing versus speaking:
The nature of the gap

When we look at the persuasive essays of middle and high school students, we often see writers who are struggling to build an elaborated argument.
Quite often, their essays contain little more than a conclusion supported by one or two claims (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982). Such essays lack the argumentative elaborations found in effective persuasive writing. What exactly is missing in these essays? Most notably, high school students often fail to address alternative perspectives. While they may acknowledge opposing side arguments (McCann, 1989), they often fail to strengthen their essays by offering counterarguments to the opposition, rebutting counterarguments to their claims, or adding reservations and qualifications to their position (Cramond, 1998; Golder & Coirier, 1994; Knudson, 1992; Scardamalia & Paris, 1985).

Without these elaborations of argument, adolescents’ persuasive essays are left one-sided, poorly supported, and open to critique.

Despite their shortcomings in persuasive writing, teens are quite capable at engaging in sophisticated face-to-face verbal argumentation (Felton & Kuhn, 2001; Resnick, Salmon, Zeitz, Wathen, & Holowchak, 1993). In fact, students begin to produce the basic components of advanced argumentation well before they enter high school. By the age of 9, most children can produce claims to support their own conclusions and counter-argue opposing claims in familiar and motivating contexts (Anderson, Chinn, Chang, Waggoner, & Yi, 1997; Eisenberg & Garvey, 1981; Pontecorvo & Girardet, 1993). By early adolescence, they are able to produce qualifications, reservations, counter-arguments, and even rebuttals in conversation (Felton & Kuhn, 2001; Stein & Miller, 1991). By high school, adolescents not only produce these basic elaborations of argument but also have begun to use them strategically in dialogue and will even adjust strategies to fit the audience (Clark & Delia, 1976; Delia, Kline, & Burleson, 1979; Hays, Brandt, & Chantry, 1988). In short, when engaged in conversation, adolescents produce the very elements of elaborated argument that seem to be missing from their written essays.

Because students are capable of such elaborate argument in speech, the challenge lies in translating oral skills of argumentation to writing. The problem with most adolescents’ written arguments may stem from their attempts to put the spoken word to paper. According to Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987), novice writers tend to employ a knowledge-telling strategy when composing text. Writing of this sort involves “telling” the reader what she or he knows using the rules and conventions of conversation. As a result, successful narrative and expository writing, at least in elementary writing contexts, can resemble spoken language in a single conversational turn. Such knowledge-telling strategies do not meet the demands of persuasive writing. A typical, single conversational turn in argumentative dialogue contains little more than a position statement supported by one or two claims—precisely what we find in poorly written persuasive essays.

To be complete, persuasive essays must also include elements of argument that often emerge only over the course of multiple conversational turns between disagreeing partners. In conversation, speakers can wait to elaborate an argument in response to their opponents because there is no need to strengthen a claim that an opponent is willing to grant. This strategy is efficient in dialogue, saving both time and effort on the part of the speaker. In contrast, writers must predict potential objections from a critical audience and address them in advance. They must clarify the bounds of their position by presenting qualifications and reservations, they must defend their claims by acknowledging counterarguments and rebutting them, and they must attempt to dismantle opposing-side arguments with counterarguments (see Figure 1). In a sense, effective writers prepare an argument by engaging in an inner dialogue that, at the very least, entertains two sides of an issue. When they sit down to write, rather than simply “telling” an argument, writers must employ a strategy that helps them transform this inner dialogue into a single position statement. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) described this process of composing as a knowledge transforming strategy. In short, adolescents produce their strongest arguments in dialogic contexts because the very
The elements of two-sided argument

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>The author's stand on the issue under discussion.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;I believe that abortion should be legal.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claim</td>
<td>An argument used to support the author's position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;In my opinion, abortion should be legal because women should have free choice.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposing-side claim</td>
<td>An argument used to support a position that opposes the author's position.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Other people say that abortion should be legal because people should have the right to choose.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counterargument</td>
<td>A critique of a claim, implied or explicit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;I know that many mothers want abortions because they feel that they don't have the money to raise this child, but there are other ways than just killing the baby off. If the mother don't want the child for any reason, they [sic] should at least put the child up for adoption.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebuttal</td>
<td>A response that neutralizes a counterargument.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;To abort [a] fetus would be murder.... Many say that it is okay to have an abortion because whatever is in your womb is not life yet. This has been proven medically and scientifically untrue.... The embryo develops and changes every day; this is proof that it is alive and human.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualification</td>
<td>A modal or modifier that communicates the force of the author's position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Abortion is OK in the right circumstances.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reservation</td>
<td>A reference to the conditions under which the author will hold or abandon a position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;The only instance I can see where abortion should be legal is when a woman is raped or in the case of incest.&quot;</td>
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process of interactive argument requires them to supply argumentative elaborations to support and qualify their claims. However, in the absence of prompting from their conversational partners, most adolescents are uncertain about how to construct a complete and elaborate argument.

**From speaking to writing: Bridging the gap**

The theoretical model of the relationship between writing and conversation provides direction for improving students' persuasive writing. As writing coaches, we can scaffold our students' ability to transform conversation into writing. In this process, conversation is the starting place for writing because it is the context for exploring the structure of persuasive argument. First, we must help our students identify the elements of elaborated two-sided argument — elements that emerge naturally over the course of conversation. This step provides students with the vocabulary and metacognitive awareness of their own verbal argumentative strategies as it sets the stage for strategically organizing ideas in writing. Next, we must help students understand the role these elaborations play in written argument. Finally, we must help students learn to structure their thinking before writing to transform their dialogic ar-
argents into written composition. In this way, face-to-face argumentation provides a natural gateway to developing our students’ persuasive writing by enhancing their ability to examine their arguments in a competitive context (Kuhn, Shaw, & Felton, 1997; Reznitskaya et al., 2001).

**Challenges to implementation**

A number of factors inherent in the writing process may make it difficult for adolescents to produce two-sided arguments in their writing. First, adolescents may be unfamiliar with opposing-side arguments. Without adequate knowledge in the topic of argument, teens may find it difficult to generate claims and critiques from an opposing perspective. In response to this difficulty, we as teachers should assign persuasive writing tasks on topics that are familiar to youths (Stcin & Miller, 1991) or take the time to expose our students to arguments on both sides of a controversial issue before asking them to write.

Another consideration is that adolescents may be overwhelmed by the cognitive demands of simultaneously structuring their writing and engaging in two-sided thinking (Crowhurst, 1996). Because most adolescents are inexperienced in two-sided thinking, and because persuasive writing requires the “logical development and arrangement of points” (Crowhurst, 1996, p. 66), prewriting activities that help students move from thinking to writing are essential. Such activities should be structured to help students integrate alternative perspectives into their arguments (Reznitskaya et al., 2001).

Finally, even if young writers are capable of engaging in two-sided thinking while they write, they may lack the appropriate argumentation schema for including alternative perspectives in their essays (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Crowhurst, 1991; Golder & Coirier, 1994). Many adolescents lack the vocabulary for describing the elements of argumentation that may help structure their thinking. When they can name claims, counterclaims, counterarguments, and rebuttals, teens can reflect on the effectiveness of their arguments. But an adequate nomenclature represents only a point of entry into the cognitively demanding task of metacognition. To develop a schema for argumentation, teens must also understand the relationships among these elements and the role each element plays in building an argument. To scaffold this awareness of the elements and structure of argument, teachers can create graphic organizers to help students visually represent them.

Given this research and theory, we sought to construct a writing workshop that would bridge the speaking—writing divide in argumentation. This workshop used verbal conversation as the foundation for students’ metacognitive understanding of the structure and function of argument. Furthermore, it scaffolded students’ transition from verbal dialogue to written argument in the writing process in both the prewriting and revision stages.

**Scaffolding persuasive writing: Putting theory into practice**

We implemented the workshop with students in an 11th-grade humanities class—a class that integrates the study of U.S. literature and history. The dual goals of that class (providing students with content knowledge of the subjects as well as improving their persuasive writing) set the stage for students to use their skills of persuasion in multiple meaningful contexts. Three contemporary topics (hate speech, abortion, and gun control) were chosen by the cooperating teachers for debate based on the goals of the humanities curriculum. After an initial 45-minute lesson on the structure of argument, students participated in a series of activities designed to enhance their appreciation for two-sided argument in persuasive writing. Two 90-minute block periods were then dedicated to each topic of argument, during which time students worked in small groups. Throughout the workshop activities, students met concurrently in their groups while the
teacher circulated around the classroom to facilitate the process and answer questions. Having students work concurrently on their writing, debate, and revision activities kept everyone busy throughout the two 90-minute periods.

**Metacognition: The structure of argument**

We began the workshop with a 45-minute lesson on the vocabulary and structure of argument. Choosing a high-interest topic for our high school students, we taught them a simplified version of the basic elements of argument—position, claim, warrant, and data (Toulmin, 1958). To clarify this terminology and make it more memorable to high school students, we developed the acronym PREP: a *position* on a topic, one or more *reasons* to support that position, *explanation* for those reasons, and *proof* to support both the reasons and the explanation. The sample argument we selected to illustrate the terminology addressed the position “The minimum drinking age in the United States should be 18.” As a class we developed an argument to support that opinion—an activity students readily engaged in (see Figure 2). Through our discussion they were able to see how they already knew the components of good argument, and by the end of this 45-minute, whole-class activity, students had the vocabulary to describe these components. This metacognitive analysis of argument structure was revisited at multiple stages of the workshop, solidifying students’ ability to analyze any argument for its component parts.

**Prewriting activities: Reading and the graphic organizer**

In the next part of the workshop, a 90-minute lesson was dedicated to providing students with time to explore the topic and develop their arguments. Students read overviews of the topic that outlined contemporary and historical perspectives. During this stage students improved their content knowledge as they simultaneously familiarized themselves with multiple perspectives on the topic, thereby increasing their understanding of both sides of the debate. In classroom discussion, students were able to explore their understanding of the controversy and the various perspectives. This initial broad exposure was designed to assist students in overcoming the first challenge in writing a critical audience—knowing and understanding both sides of the controversy.

Next, students were assigned positions on the issue. Following the conventions of forensics instruction, students were expected to be able to argue either side. Although an attempt was made to allow students to defend their true positions, across the course of the workshop each student was asked to defend an opposing-side position at least once. This arrangement provided advantages beyond the logistics of creating equal numbers on either side of the issue. In arguing a position they did not hold, students practiced the skill of generating credible opposing-side arguments—a skill that we would ultimately like them to internalize in the writing process.

To further prepare for writing their persuasive papers, students completed a blank version of the PREP graphic organizer they had used in analyzing the sample argument (Figure 2). The students were permitted to use as many PREP sheets as they needed based on the number of claims they planned to present in their essays. This graphic organizer enabled them to solidify their ideas before writing and simultaneously underscored the basic components of argument, scaffolding their argument structure in preparation for the written persuasive piece. One full period of 90 minutes was dedicated to completing these activities. For homework, students wrote persuasive papers arguing their assigned positions.

**Revision activity: Debate**

In the next stage of the workshop, a 90-minute lesson was designed to scaffold students’ inclusion of two-sided arguments in their writing by allowing them to argue their position in the con-
text of oral debate. The debate context exposed students to opposing-side arguments and provided them with the opportunity to hear critiques of their claims. To maximize individual participation in the debate, students were divided into groups of four, with two individuals representing each side of the issue. One student from each side argued with a student from the opposition, while the second student on either side listened closely. The task of the second student was to follow the debate closely and give feedback to her or his partner. After about 10–15 minutes of debate, students got this feedback. Then, the pairs of students filled out a graphic organizer called the critique sheet (Figure 3). This graphic helped them identify the major reasons they gave, criticisms made by the opposition, and responses they gave (or should have given) to these criticisms in their attempts to persuade the opposition.

The students then switched roles. While the first debaters listened, those who had been listen-
In this second stage of the debate, the new speakers now had the ability to test out the decisions made during the feedback session as well as present any arguments that weren't voiced during the first debate. The opportunity to speak, meet with a new opponent, and test the insights from the feedback session all worked to maintain student interest. Again, after about 10–15 minutes of discussion students had the opportunity to review their arguments with their partners and fill out another critique sheet on their debate.

This sequence of activities served a few purposes. First, both the debate and the metacognitive reflection after the debate helped scaffold students' metacognitive understanding of the necessity of two-sided argument in persuasion. During the verbal debate, students were automatically engaged in considering opposing perspectives, developing counterarguments and rebuttals, and creating qualifications and reservations to their arguments. Then, completing the critique sheet provided a scaffold for students as they re-

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**Figure 3**

Example of a dialogue critique sheet graphic organizer

- **Position:** What is your position on this issue?
- **Reason:** What is/are your reason(s) for this position?
- **Criticism:** How did your opponent criticize your reason(s)?
- **Response:** How did you (or could you) respond to this criticism/these criticisms?
vised their arguments to address the opposition. Furthermore, because students worked in pairs to complete the graphic organizer they shared the cognitive load of keeping track of their arguments and reflecting on their performance. Each student had a partner who helped her or him summarize the major pieces of the argument and tease out its most effective components.

**Revision activity: Peer response to writing**

During this stage students were encouraged to evaluate and revise the argument structure of their essays as they stepped through an essay revision worksheet (Figure 4). The questions of the revision worksheet helped students focus on effective components of their argument and relate their verbal debate experience to the written essay. By working with their debate partner, students again could share the cognitive load in developing more elaborate, two-sided arguments. After revising their essays with their respective partners, students were assigned to write a second draft for homework. The entire revision activity, including the debate and the peer response session, took an additional period of 90 minutes.

**The goal: Two-sided argument**

This multistage argumentative writing workshop helped students overcome the three obstacles to transforming oral argumentation into writing. First, it assisted students' understanding of alternative perspectives. Students gained their initial exposure when learning about the controversy in

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**Figure 4**

**Example of essay revision worksheet**

**Essay revision worksheet**

With a partner, read the original essay you wrote on this week’s topic. Think about the strengths and weaknesses of your argument in that essay and discuss them with your partner. Then, use this worksheet to record your observations and plan for your revised draft. Be sure to take thorough notes on this worksheet. It is a way for you to remember what changes you need to make when you rewrite your draft, and it’s a way for me to understand how you would like to improve your argument.

1. Briefly, what is the main reason (argument) that you present in your essay?

2. What are the strengths of your essay as you have written it?

3. What could you do to make your argument stronger?

4. Is there anything you might add or remove from your essay? If so, what would you add or remove and why?

5. Is there anything you learned in the class activity today that would help make your essay stronger? If so, what?
general. Later they had the opportunity to both hear the opposition and analyze more and less effective responses to that opposition. Second, this workshop scaffolded the transition from dialogue to writing. Students had the chance to revise their arguments after they experienced a "live" critical audience in debate and received oral and written feedback from a sympathetic listener. Finally, this workshop provided a schema for structuring students’ arguments. Students had multiple experiences with both written and oral argument structure: when initially outlining their position, later when analyzing a partner’s oral debate arguments, again when receiving feedback on their own debate arguments, and finally when revising their persuasive essays. These multiple opportunities for metacognitive reflection on their debates and essays gave them practice in elaborating their arguments.

As a result of the workshop, students used their metacognitive understanding of argument to improve their essays. On their revision sheets (Figure 3), a number of students explicitly acknowledged the need to address opposing-side arguments. Students’ notes to themselves included the following examples: “Respond to things the other side might say,” “think of things the other side might respond to,” “put some of my opponents’ ideas.” These reminders suggest that the debate experience focused students’ attention on the need to address a critical audience in their writing.

Indeed, the revised essays reflect this new perspective. For example, during the abortion debate, Carrie (all students’ names are pseudonyms) was confronted with the claim that her pro-choice stance allowed the killing of a human life. In her revised essay, she addressed this issue head-on with her own definition of life:

The zygote is not a developed human. It is just a bunch of tissue.... My definition of life is that the organism has physical features that have any type of movement, mental features that the organism can think on its own, and spiritual experience that has a soul. So a bunch of tissues don’t [sic] have a physical, mental, and spiritual aspects to them. They just do their job. That is keep on making more cells.

In her first written effort to explicate her pro-choice position, Carrie had not considered the issue of killing life. But the workshop experience encouraged her to incorporate a counterclaim as well as a counterargument in her second draft. Thus two-sided argument became part of her written discourse.

Angela similarly demonstrated changes in her writing in response to the workshop experience. She noted the following on her essay revision sheet:

The discussion, I think, [will make] my second essay better, because my opponent brought up a good point that I wasn’t prepared to answer. Though I think I handled it well, it made me think more about other situations in life. She said, "What about rape?"
In response to her opponent’s challenge, Angela incorporated a rebuttal in her revised essay.

People once asked me, “But what about rape? If you got raped, would you still want the baby?” Then I say “no.” Though it’s rape and I didn’t ask for it, it’s my baby. It’s part of me and I’d have to keep it. People shouldn’t punish the baby for what happened. The mother is going to keep it any ways. The rapist wouldn’t have anything to do with it. It’s the mother’s blood. I’d keep the baby because it would be apart of me. [sic]

These examples illustrate how the workshop experience moved students to identify and answer challenges to their argument in their written work. The verbal debate experience provided them the opportunity to test their argument “live.” Then they imagined that live audience as part of the critical audience they were addressing in their writing. This two-sided thinking involved argumentation that refutes, rather than concedes, arguments from the opposition.

The last two elements of argument, qualifications and reservations, involve adjusting one’s position in concession to the opposition. Rather than build an argument, these elements clarify the writer’s position. Qualifications communicate the strength or force of a position statement through the use of modals and modifiers. Expressions like often, may, and can qualify a position statement by mitigating the force of the writer’s conclusion. Reservations, on the other hand, communicate the specific circumstances under which one is willing to hold or abandon a stance. Reservations preempt possible critiques of a position by excluding circumstances under which a position may be untenable or objectionable. Reservations demonstrate that a writer has thought through opposing viewpoints and readily acknowledges the limits to her or his position.

In some cases, students introduced modals or brief statements to emphasize the conditional nature of their position. For example, one student arguing against gun control admitted that if “someone is sick mentally and we have records then we shouldn’t give it to them.” Another student qualified her antiabortion stance by admitting, “abortion should be legal...when a woman is raped or in the case of incest.” Other students composed more detailed concessions. For example, one student arguing against legalized abortion elaborated on the reasons for her reservations:

The only instance I can see where abortion should be legal is when a woman is raped or in the case of incest. Rape is something one is not responsible for and is by no means the fault of the woman, so therefore she should be able to terminate that pregnancy. Incest can lead to severe deformation and is morally unhealthy in any family.

However, the addition of qualifications and reservations in students’ revised drafts occurred infrequently. In light of the activities, worksheets, and instructions given to students throughout the workshop, this result is not surprising. Because students were encouraged repeatedly to “strengthen” their arguments, they likely felt the need to refute the opposition rather than qualify their own positions. One possible solution to this problem would be to add these elements to the graphic organizers the students use to reflect on their debates and to write and revise their essays. A second solution would be to develop activities that help students better understand the role of qualifications and reservations in a complete argument. Ultimately, however, to increase students’ use of qualifications and reservations in their writing, we must first help them understand that to qualify an argument does not weaken it. This area, which involves students’ beliefs about the role of strong opinions in good argument, merits further investigation.

Final thoughts

Improving students’ persuasive writing obviously starts with giving students the opportunity to write. The ways in which we support their writing
and thinking about controversial issues can help facilitate that process. First, we need to recognize the argument skills that students already possess and harness those skills in the writing process. Students understand the fundamentals of argument and can build elaborate two-sided arguments in discussion. By drawing on students’ experience in oral argumentation, we can help them better understand the structure of their written arguments. By having them test their written arguments in oral debate, we make the critical audience come alive. In this way our students become more aware of how a well-written argument addresses multiple perspectives. In bringing together the experiences of dialogue and written argument, students see the intimate relationship between the two.

Second, we can assist students’ metacognitive understanding of the fundamentals of argument through activities in both prewriting and revision. By using graphic organizers we help students become aware of their implicit knowledge about argument structure. I discover that many of their instincts about strong and weak arguments in discussion are based on how we present the elements of argument. In the revision process, the students are scaffolded in evaluating the arguments that they have written. They are given the opportunity to consider how they might elaborate their arguments in response to an opponent outside of the debate context. This process introduces students to the internal dialogue that they will eventually use to elaborate their arguments in the writing process. By drawing upon what students know and scaffolding their meta-awareness of their argument and writing, we are providing a learning context to move them forward in writing increasingly sophisticated persuasive pieces.

Finally, we need to place persuasive writing within a meaningful context. Writing is a social activity—a means of sharing ideas with others. When we put persuasive writing in the context of debate we give students additional reason to write. It becomes a means by which students formalize their thinking, share their ideas, and get feedback. As a result, students are motivated to examine their writing, its structure, and its impact on their readers.

Though this persuasive writing workshop was designed for implementation in an 11th-grade humanities class, it could be tailored for other grades and contexts. Research suggests that even middle school students can benefit from instruction in persuasive writing (Knudson 1991; Yeh, 1998). Moreover, persuasive writing can be understood as an extension of any writing whose purpose is to put forth and defend an idea (Fulkerson, 1996). Thus, reading and writing classes need not be the only context in which students are exposed to the principles and strategies of effective argument.

Improving students’ skills in persuasive writing is a complex task. It requires that we not only introduce writing strategies to students but also change our very practices as teachers. To effect change in students’ understanding and writing of argument, we must begin by creating contexts in which argument is a natural part of classroom discourse. By giving students the opportunity to formulate and defend their opinions in various content areas, we tap into their natural talent for argument. Once we open the doors for students to express and defend their opinions in class, we can begin the process of helping them hone their skills of written argument.

REFERENCES


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