

Why Argue? Helping Students See the Point

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Read the comments on any website and you may despair at Americans' inability to argue well. Thankfully, educators now name argumentative reasoning as one of the basics students should leave school with.

But what are these skills and how do children acquire them? Deanna Kuhn and Amanda Crowell, of Columbia University's Teachers College, have designed an innovative curriculum to foster their development and measured the results. Among their findings, published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, dialogue is a better path to developing argument skills than writing.

"Children engage in conversation from very early on," explains Kuhn. "It has a point in real life." Fulfilling a writing assignment, on the other hand, largely entails figuring out what the teacher wants and delivering it. To the student, "that's its only function."

Kuhn and Crowell conducted a three-year intervention at an urban middle school whose students were predominantly Hispanic, African-American, and low-income. Beginning in sixth grade, two classes totaling 48 children participated; a comparison group of 23 were taught in a more conventional way.

Each year comprised four 13-class segments. Each quarter, the students entertained one social issue—beginning with subjects close to their lives, such as school discipline, and proceeding to issues of broader social consequence, such as abortion and gun control. Choosing their sides and working in groups, students prepared for debate—enumerating and evaluating reasons for their beliefs, surmising opponents' arguments, and considering counterarguments and rebuttals. Then, pairs of same-side students debated opposing pairs.

In years two and three, participants were asked during each cycle to generate questions whose answers would help them make their arguments—a way of promoting their appreciation of evidence. Soon, they not only generated many questions but also volunteered to research the answers.

The debates took place via computer—another innovation of the intervention—so the dialogue remained on the screen, promoting reflection. The cycle culminated in a lively "showdown" between the teams, in which students individually took the "hotseat" debating an opponent but could turn to their teammates for tactical "huddles." Finally, students wrote individual essays justifying their positions on the topic.

The comparison class engaged in full-class teacher-led discussions of similar topics and wrote essays—14 annually compared to the intervention groups' four.

Before the intervention and after each year, all students wrote essays on entirely new topics. The researchers analyzed these for the kinds and number of arguments—those focused on the virtues of one's

own side; those addressing the opposing side (“dual perspective”); and those attempting to weigh pros and cons of each side (“integrative perspective”). They also looked at the questions the students would like answers to.

On each count, the experimental group did better, making more of the higher forms of arguments and listing more questions of substance than the control group.

Crucially, says Kuhn, the children embraced a core value of citizenship: informed argument matters. They expressed it too. “We have gotten a little complaint from nearby classrooms that it’s a bit noisy,” she adds.