

AN ARGUMENT EVERYONE WINS

SHARED LEARNING UNITES TEACHERS
ACROSS SCHOOLS AND GRADE LEVELS

By Lauren Goldberg, Brad Siegel,
and Gravity Goldberg

Do you like hot chocolate or chicken noodle soup on a cold winter day? Would you prefer to travel by bus or train to New York City?

A 2nd-grade teacher recounted these verbal interchanges as examples of arguments facilitated routinely in her classroom. She lauded the accomplishments of her 2nd-grade students maturely engaging in conversational arguments, citing their ability to make a claim and provide evidence as support without preparation.

PROCESS FOR LOOKING AT STUDENT ARGUMENT WRITING

- Name what you see without judgments.
- Describe what you think the writer is doing.
- Avoid jargon while being as specific as possible.
- Discuss and imagine next steps for this writer.
- Compare pieces and name specifically what is similar and different.
- Create continuums with clear descriptions that outline teaching moves and ideas.



The teacher, sitting among a diverse group of educators, acknowledged that these arguments take a great deal of time and guidance. Clearly impressed, the 6th-grade science teacher, 12th-grade AP English teacher, elementary principal, and K-8 literacy coach congratulated the teacher and considered similar uses of argument in their classrooms.

School districts across the U.S. are bombarding teachers with professional development to meet rigorous expectations of the Common Core State Standards with mixed levels of success. On occasion, districts implement creative and unique practices to recast the nature of professional learning.

The three authors of this article — a K-12 regional director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment responsible for orchestrating professional learning, a high school English teacher who participated in the professional learning, and an independent literacy consultant who supports four districts' professional learning — share their experiences about K-12 professional learning involving argument and writing. We offer insights from these three perspectives on how sustained and dynamic professional learning can cut across many groups of educators coming from different schools.

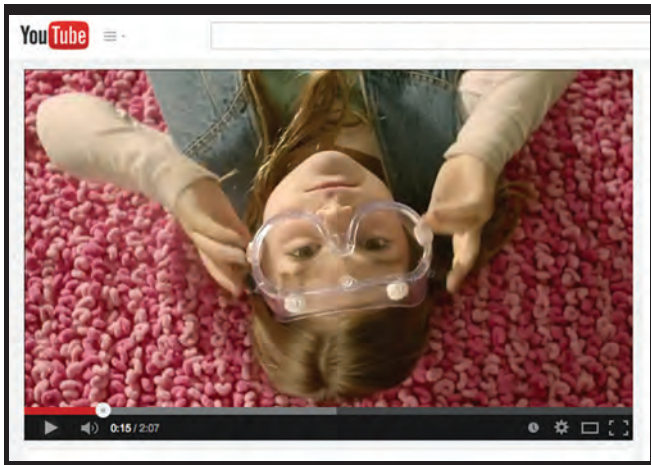
The goal at the outset was to eliminate the boundaries often existing between curriculum and professional learning. Our work explored the nature of one form of writing — argument — with the intention of making the process of argument transcend a particular writing experience.

Argument, a construct grounded in British philosopher Stephen Toulmin's work and researched extensively in current education writing, is a way of thinking that cultivates students' cognitive capacities and is most effectively taught through multiple mediums and forms of expression (Kuhn, 1992; Lunsford & Ruskiewicz, 2009). This deeper, conceptual examination of argument is important, realizing instruction cannot reside merely at the surface of standards prescribed by the Common Core.

REFERENCES

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Lauren Goldberg (lgoldberg9@fordham.edu) is an English teacher at Northern Highlands Regional High School in Allendale, New Jersey, and a doctoral student at Fordham University. Brad Siegel (siegelb@northernhighlands.org) is K-12 director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment for the Allendale, Ho-Ho-Kus, Northern Highlands, and Upper Saddle River School Districts of New Jersey. Gravity Goldberg (gravity@drgravitygoldberg.com) is a literacy consultant.



Teachers discussed Internet ads from the toy company GoldieBlox, then used the same activity with their students the next day.

EXCERPTS OF STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE GOLDIEBLOX “PRINCESS MACHINE” AD

| Question 1: What is the argument? | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Grade 1 | Girls should use their brains. |
| Grade 2 | Girls like building cool stuff. |
| Grade 6 | 1. All girls don't like only girl stuff, but they also like boy stuff. 2. Don't underestimate girls. 3. Girls want better toys, like boys have. 4. Girls don't just want to be known as playing with dolls but want things to help them be smart. |
| Grade 10 | Girls can do what boys can do; girls should pursue careers in STEM; girls are creative; girls' toys are limiting; advocating gender equality; challenging gender norms; to empower girls; to challenge the toy industry. |

DIRECTOR OF CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, AND ASSESSMENT

A multidimensional approach

By Brad Siegel

This small region of public districts in northern New Jersey includes three high-performing K-8 schools sending students to one high school. Students attending these schools come from affluent homes of relatively homogeneous ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Shared curricular services across districts are a long-standing tradition.



These districts encounter many roadblocks when teachers come together from different grade levels with varied professional interests, but Common Core and other curriculum initiatives require us to approach literacy education with deliberate attention to transitions,

coherence, and reinforcement.

Unpacking standards and constructing writing prompts are common practices in these districts. In choosing a different, multidimensional approach, the districts' goals were to invigorate teachers, reach all educators in the districts, and directly impact classroom practice.

Determined to meet these aims, the districts' writing articulation committee — made up of teachers, coaches, curriculum coordinators, principals, a literacy consultant, and the director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment — chose to explore the nature of argument with an end goal of collecting student writing samples, reviewing the merits and pitfalls of their writing, and identifying prototypes representing a progression of writing along a K-12 continuum.

This close and collaborative review of student pieces would inform teachers about elements of argument writing at each grade level and enable the group to discuss what features they value.

Beginning in fall 2013, the literacy consultant and I led

interactive instructional exercises that allowed educators to experience argument in small-group settings of K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12 and move between language arts literacy and content areas, such as social studies and science. Most importantly, teachers participated in experiential learning in debates, role-plays, and interpretations of music and media from popular culture.

In one example that illuminates the multifaceted, differentiated professional work with argument, teachers reviewed Internet ads from a toy company called GoldieBlox. While promoting the company's products, the commercials also have a distinct social justice angle: encouraging young women's pursuits in STEM education.

Ads are concise and complex texts containing myriad messages. Interpreting the arguments implicitly evident in the creator's messages became the central instructional focus of one professional learning activity. Teachers worked in mixed groups to dissect the ads, first as a consumer of information and then from the lens of a student sitting in their classroom.

Comparing the rich and varied perspectives among educators was revealing and provocative. At a glance, though, one can see the limits of teachers merely assuming the role of the student.

We took this professional learning a step further by asking all 45 teachers to use the same activity in class the following day. All students in 1st through 12th grade watched the same ad and answered the same questions the teachers had the day before. Teachers then compiled and shared their experiences in an online document for all members of the committee to review.

This short and simple exercise pushed teachers to examine the nature of argument in a complex text, attain useful pedagogical knowledge, collaborate with colleagues across grade levels, and reflect on students' abilities to analyze multimodal arguments.

TEACHER

Bringing the learning back to the classroom

By Lauren Goldberg

A cross-section of English teachers and content-area teachers from eight schools came together to focus on the genre of argument, sharing strategies and experiences that could apply to all grade levels.



Unlike much of the professional learning I've experienced, this was interactive and playful, allowing teachers to read argumentative

texts and engage in arguments with colleagues. Instructions varied. Sometimes the facilitator assigned our positions, sometimes we chose; sometimes we had time to prepare our arguments, sometimes not. The day repeatedly immersed participants in engaging activities covering a wide range of topics across content areas that could be adapted for immediate use in the classroom.

The group began by viewing a GoldieBlox commercial titled "Princess Machine." The ad depicts three girls, bored by a TV commercial featuring dress-up princesses, grabbing tools and safety goggles to create their own larger-than-life Rube Goldberg machine out of pink teapots, feather boas, and other "girly" toys.

This machine is ultimately used to change the channel on their television from the video featuring stereotypical princesses to a cartoon featuring a female engineer and the slogan, "GoldieBlox: Toys for Future Engineers."

After watching the commercial, we interpreted the argument and imagined our students' responses. How would our students interpret this digital text? Would they be able to identify the argument of the video and describe its intended audience? Could they provide evidence for those claims? Would students pick up on specific lyrics in the song or rely more heavily on visuals?

A kindergarten teacher thought that her students might believe the video was showcasing pink toys instead of repurposing them. A 1st-grade teacher insisted that her students would be able to recognize the video's argument that girls don't really need pink toys. A 12th-grade AP English teacher imagined that her students would want to investigate the context of the text,

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such as the story behind the creation of the commercial.

At the end of a lively discussion, the facilitator suggested that we show the two-minute video to our students the next day and ask them our three discussion questions about purpose, audience, and evidence. We wondered if we'd be able to see differences in our students' interpretations across grade levels.

My 10th graders were enthralled by the commercial. They asked to see it a second time so they could pay closer attention to its details before answering the questions. Without much instruction or planning on my part, students launched into arguments about the possible purposes of this text, supporting and challenging each other's interpretations with details from the video. In three different class periods, I watched as this nuanced yet accessible text fueled provocative and impassioned discussions.

Days later, I read the collaborative document containing all of the participating K-12 teachers' reports of student reactions. I had asked my students to analyze a text's argument before, but I had never given them a chance to see how their responses compared to those of students in other classes or grades. They were excited to evaluate how their own responses measured up to students across the grade levels.

Weeks later, without my

prompting, many students drew connections to the commercial during our discussion of the representation of traditional gender roles in the Tennessee Williams play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The day after the Super Bowl, students burst into my classroom with news that they'd seen another GoldieBlox ad. A particularly inspired student announced that she wanted to create her own version of the GoldieBlox video. While so many workshops I attend are teacher-focused, it was refreshing to see my students at the center of the learning.

This is what effective professional learning looks like — immediate and practical results derived from risk taking and collaboration.

LITERACY CONSULTANT

Learning through articulation and application

By Gravity Goldberg

Three main elements contributed to this successful professional learning experience. First, there was time to learn about and discuss the topic. In this case, that meant learning what argument writing is, what the characteristics are, how it is different than other text types, and what the standards require at each grade level. This type of learning was mostly done in regional workshops with time and space to study the topic away from the daily demands of the classroom.



The second element was the focus on immediate classroom application. Teachers were encouraged and excited to go back to their classrooms and try out the strategies they had experienced and discussed.

Finally, there was an emphasis on looking at student work and keeping students at the center. This meant teachers went beyond summarizing what they felt students took away from classroom experiences and focused on documenting student work and sharing it for collaborative conversations and analysis.

Learn about a topic. During the initial regional meetings, several experiences helped all teachers deepen their understanding about argument writing. Four distinct yet complementary activities supported teachers' learning. These activities included trying the argument writing and reflecting on their own argument process, looking at examples of argument writing and naming what they noticed, analyzing types of everyday arguments such as songs, commercials, and images, and using an argument protocol to have debates.

Classroom application. Based on their experiences learning about and doing the work of argument themselves, teachers were able to try similar lessons with their students. This was true even though the teachers spanned K-12 and taught different subject areas.

As a consultant, I supported teachers in the classroom in a number of areas. Teachers read and discussed mentor argument texts with their students. We also looked closely at student conversations and behaviors and pointed out where they already successfully used argument skills in their everyday lives.

What made this professional learning powerful was the careful planning and intersection of articulation and professional development.

Students were invited to use multimodal texts in and out of class as well as across subject areas to analyze arguments and form their own. Students engaged in debate in many classrooms on topics they were passionate about. We began to see these skills being used independently when it came time to write arguments.

Collaborative assessment conversations. By looking at student work, teachers began to deepen their own understanding of argument, writing techniques, and teaching. These conversations were not about creating or using rubrics. They were also not about a final product, although teachers chose and shared an impressive selection of student work. Instead, conversations focused on looking closely at what students did as writers and thinkers in their work with argument.

What made this professional learning powerful was the careful planning and intersection of articulation and professional development. Teachers were energized, much more knowledgeable about argument writing, and more cohesive across schools, grade levels, and departments. Argument actually brought these teachers and classrooms closer together. ■