

More Argument, Fewer Standards

By Mike Schmoker and Gerald Graff

If we want record numbers of students to succeed in postsecondary studies and careers, an ancient, accessible concept needs to be restored to its rightful place at the center of schooling: argument. In its various forms, it includes the ability to analyze and assess facts and evidence, support our solutions, and defend our interpretations and recommendations with clarity and precision—in every subject area. Argument is the primary skill essential to our success as citizens, students, and workers.

The new **common-core standards**, which include the best English/language arts standards to date, fully acknowledge this. They affirm unequivocally that “argument is the soul of an education.” But, alas, unless adjustments are made, these new standards documents could drown out and obscure the welcome emphasis they put on argument.

Every K-12 teacher and administrator should know the powerful case for argument. (They currently *do not*). For decades, the most enlightened educators and academics have put it at the center of education. They implore us to see that argument enlivens learning and is at the heart of inquiry, innovation, and problem-solving. Education researchers like Robert Marzano, George Hillocks, and Deanna Kuhn have demonstrated that in-school opportunities to argue and debate about current issues, literary characters, and the pros and cons of a math solution have an astonishing impact on learning—and test scores. Argument not only makes subject matter more interesting; it also dramatically increases our ability to retain, retrieve, apply, and synthesize knowledge. It works for all students—from lowest- to highest-achieving. Yet many educators never learn this. And they never learn that argument is the unrivaled key to effective reading, writing, and speaking.

Argument, in short, is the essence of thought. So, it is heartening to see that the English/language arts documents of the Common Core State Standards Initiative acknowledge the supreme and “special place” of argument among all other literacy standards. We hope that readers won’t overlook the section in the common-core research that asserts that argument is “the soul of an education” with “unique importance in college and careers.” One of us—Jerry Graff—was prominently mentioned in this section, for demonstrating that college is fundamentally an “argument culture.” To succeed, students can’t simply amass information (as important as that is); they must also weigh its value and use it to resolve conflicting opinions, offer solutions, and propose reasonable recommendations. The same could be said for the demands of citizenship and the modern workplace.

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We are encouraged, then, by the common-core standards, which contain a ringing endorsement of argument as the primary mode for reading, talking, and writing about complex texts. What concerns us is that for all their merits, these standards are still overlong, redundant, and often confusing. Consequently, the most important and powerful standards are at risk of being marginalized—or overlooked entirely.

All standards are not created equal. We believe it is far more critical for teachers to help students to analyze, evaluate, and support their conclusions with evidence than it is for them to spend precious time on puzzling standards like these:

“Compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing structure

of each text contributes to its meaning and style”; or

“Analyze different points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) creating such effects as suspense or humor.”

We have tested these and similar standards on many teachers. They, like us, have *no idea* what these mean or how to teach them. And there are still—despite some reductions from earlier drafts—too many “foundations” standards. Like their lamentable state-level predecessors, these standards would have students learning from long lists of mechanical skills well into the later grades, where they only perpetuate a lower-order, worksheet-driven curriculum at the expense of close, evaluative, and argumentative reading, discussion, and writing.

The overriding lesson from our attempt to create and implement state standards was that clarity is critical and that less is more. To this end, let’s make sure that this time around, these new, national standards are seen as true pilot documents, to be learned from, reduced, and clarified as we closely study their implementation by teachers.

In the meantime, let’s immediately begin, as the new standards urge us, to give students hundreds of opportunities, every year, to dismantle and defend arguments about increasingly rich, complex texts. From the earliest grades, let’s have them argue about the pros and cons of almost anything: literary characters and interpretations, global warming, capitalism vs. socialism, Sarah Palin, or the comparative quality of life in the United States and Canada (based on statistical analysis). Let’s ask students to explain their reasoning for which alternative-energy source we should invest in as they read, talk, and write about what they are learning in novels, textbooks, newspapers, and magazines.

As standards and assessments make their necessarily lurching journey from good to (we hope) great, there is no reason to postpone the implementation of the most critical standards, those focused on argument and its corollaries. Tied to a content-rich curriculum, these have unparalleled power to make school interesting—and to prepare students for college, careers, citizenship, or any achievement test that will ever come their way.

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