Educational Leadership

October 2006 | Volume **64** | Number **2**
Reading, Writing, Thinking Pages 48-52

For the Sake of Argument

Alex Hernandez, Melissa Aul Kaplan and Robert Schwartz

Students excel in response to this urban high school's philosophy: The heart of good writing is good thinking.

Teachers who try to put critical thinking at the forefront of high school literacy instruction often find that students respond with blank stares, half-hearted responses, and plagiarized papers. Even on those special days when students passionately discuss ideas, it can be challenging for them to translate their discourse into rigorous writing. When so many students read and write below grade level, how can teachers promote critical thinking in literacy?

Our experience at View Park Preparatory High School, a charter school in South Los Angeles, suggests that schools do not have to choose between remediation and acceleration. View Park Prep enrolls 375 students in grades 9–12. Ninety-eight percent are African American, and half are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. View Park's literacy program has a single, measurable goal: By graduation, every student will be able to write a 500-word sustained argument free of mechanical error, reflecting his or her ability to reason.

The decision to emphasize argumentation reflects View Park's philosophy that the heart of good writing is good thinking. Other approaches often teach writing as a process or as a series of discrete skills. Isolated from the larger tapestry of reading and thinking, the ability to write becomes meaningless. Students may dazzle us with their word choice and sentence structure, but they often have nothing compelling to say. In contrast, at View Park, we treat writing not as an end in itself but as a means to an end as students learn effective argumentation and the type of analytical reasoning necessary for college success.

The View Park Approach in Action

Setting the Stage

On the first day of 9th grade English, View Park students are greeted with a writing assignment: Describe a moment in your life that you consider special. Although some groan, others get right to work. Most of the students put little thought into the assignment. Personal reflections are easy enough to fudge, after all.

Students are surprised, however, by Ms. Klein's[1] persistent questioning. One student, James, chooses to write about a family trip to the South. Ms. Klein repeatedly questions him about *why* he deems the trip “special.” Other students volunteer suggestions: because it's fun, because it's exciting, because it's out of the ordinary. After much discussion, the class agrees on a definition of “special.”

As this classroom exercise shows, the process of introducing high literacy standards in urban schools often has humble, if not downright messy, beginnings. But the class's opening discussion of what makes an experience “special” has laid the groundwork for introducing an

essential question for the students' first exercise in literary argumentation later that week: What makes the moment in Etheridge Knight's “Haiku III” so special? In addition, the teacher has systematically introduced several key practices of the school's literacy program:

- *Personal reflections* help students connect their personal experiences to literary texts as they reflect on a simplified version of an essential question.
- *Socratic discussion* develops students' critical-thinking skills as they are pushed to define terms and extend their reasoning. The class deepens its thinking about the essential question long before students put pencil to paper. Writing, when it happens, will be an extension of student thought and discussion.
- *Essential questions* provide a lens for literary interpretation, set the parameters for student arguments, and define the culminating writing assignment.

Reading for Understanding

To begin the class's study of “Haiku III,” Ms. Klein asks students to read the poem and identify the poem's five *W*s (Who, What, When, Where, and Why) and one *H* (How):

Eastern guard tower
glints in sunset; convicts rest
like lizards on rocks.
—Etheridge Knight, 1968. Reprinted with permission.

The students quickly identify the first four *W*s but struggle to find the Why. Ms. Klein draws attention to the punctuation, asking the class about the purpose of the semicolon. No one recalls the purpose of this particular mark. Ms. Klein reminds them that a semicolon connects two complete sentences and sometimes signifies a cause-and-effect relationship.

Keisha cries out in frustration, “Yeah, but how could the sunset cause the convicts to rest on rocks?” Ms. Klein asks students to sketch the scene. Almost immediately, Rochelle bursts out with pride, “The sun is blinding the guards!”

Text selection is crucial to the success of the program, and “Haiku III” is appealing for several reasons. First, the brevity of a haiku makes it accessible to nearly all students in the class, most of whom have limited reading comprehension skills. Second, the haiku, in spite of its brevity, contains powerful ideas worthy of Socratic discussion, making the text suitable for argumentation. These ideas hold the interest of advanced students but also respect the critical-thinking skills of students with academic deficiencies. A 14-year-old with 5th grade reading skills can still discuss the concept of “special moments.” Finally, students connect with the African American author and his personal story of redemption, which Ms. Klein has shared with them. Although we do not advocate using only African American authors with African American students, creatively connecting students to texts is important, especially for 9th graders who may resist reading and writing.

Making the Argument

“OK, class! By saying that this moment is special, you are making a *claim*.” Still focused on the text, Ms. Klein asks the students to take several minutes to write a claim answering the essential question, What makes the moment in Etheridge Knight's “Haiku III” so special? This first draft of the unit's culminating assignment builds on the class discussion, illustrating for students that writing is an extension of thinking. After a few minutes, Ms. Klein writes several student answers on the board:

Keisha: This moment is special because the guards can't see the prisoners.

James: The moment is special because the guards are blinded.

Rochelle: The moment is special because the prisoners have a moment of freedom.

Ms. Klein points out that all three answers contain some truth according to the class's interpretation of the poem, and then she asks the students to compare the answers. The students conclude that both James and Keisha gave factual answers, but Rochelle used facts to interpret the events. As Ms. Klein explains, Rochelle's is the only answer that contains an arguable claim.

View Park students never begin a formal writing assignment until they map out their arguments and refine their reasoning through Socratic discussion. In this example, the class's discussion about why the moment in “Haiku III” is so special leads to a claim, which becomes the starting point for the written assignment, to write a complete argument using evidence from the haiku.

A Model of Argumentation

This example from Ms. Klein's 9th grade class illustrates how students are introduced to the concept of a *claim*, the first of four elements of an argument included in Stephen Toulmin's (1958) Model of Argumentation. View Park bases its literacy instruction throughout the grades on this model. Students devote most of their 9th grade year to learning the four elements of an argument: claim (the position); clarification (qualifiers limiting the claim); evidence (support for the claim); and warrant (the reasoning that connects the evidence to the claim).

The central goal of 9th grade English is for students to learn to use the model and write one good argument. This argument may only be a paragraph in length, although some students produce longer and more complex arguments by the end of the first year.

We require 9th and 10th grade students to be explicit in their argument by formally labeling the four elements. Struggling writers benefit from the model's clear structure because it tells them how to navigate through an assignment, avoiding the “I don't know where to start” syndrome. Because the writing assignment relies on students' ability to express their reasoning, plagiarism becomes virtually impossible.

On each writing assignment, students receive feedback in two areas: strength of argument and mechanical accuracy. Teachers assess strength of argument using a rubric emphasizing the four key elements. They assess mechanics only in terms of their effect on the argument. For example, a teacher might write, “This is a run-on sentence. Would shorter sentences with transition words better illustrate your point?” Although teachers highlight every error in a student's piece of writing, they often do so on a separate copy of the paper. Students are less discouraged by marked papers replete with errors because they see that the purpose of improving mechanics is to strengthen their argument. View Park does not use any grammar texts or prewritten grammar exercises for high school students. Students learn writing mechanics within the context of their writing goals.

In 10th grade, students gain facility in using the model. They start to write with more purpose and elevate the quality of the Socratic discussions. By the middle of 10th grade, teachers often observe their lowest-achieving students showing sparks of great thinking. Socratic discussions become more student driven as students recognize weaknesses in other people's arguments and offer rebuttals. Most students can sustain arguments roughly one page long by the end of 10th grade. By then, approximately 60 percent of the students are prepared to leave the formal structure of the Toulmin model.

Accelerating Student Achievement

The training wheels come off in 11th grade, and students write without explicitly labeling the components of their arguments. Students still generally use the Toulmin model in their notes and drafts to organize increasingly sophisticated arguments, adding sub-claims, expanded clarifications, and rebuttals when appropriate. Teachers promote this acceleration by posing more challenging essential questions, using texts that support multiple interpretations, and choosing larger passages from which students analyze and select evidence. By the end of four years, we expect every student to be able to sustain an argument in response to college-level material.

For example, 11th graders explore Nathaniel Hawthorne's “Young Goodman Brown” using the question, Does this short story assume that humankind is inherently good or inherently wicked? They study Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* using the question, Does R. P. McMurphy serve to liberate or further imprison his fellow patients on the ward? Twelfth graders read Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and consider the question, As illustrated in this drama, does passion degrade or beautify the human experience?

View Park uses the Toulmin model as a writing-across-the-curriculum program. For example, 11th grade history students study Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and develop arguments addressing the question, Is civil disobedience ever justified?

In chemistry, 10th grade students are asked to make a written argument about the primary causes of fish kills in a local river, using data on water temperature, pH levels, and ion concentration as evidence. This essential question requires students to use higher-order thinking skills to interpret technical data and determine causal relationships among observable phenomena.

In math, 9th grade students use the Toulmin framework to argue whether two different shapes can have the same area. Students analyze two shapes on a grid to create the evidence that will support their arguments. The exercise helps guide students toward investigation and justification and away from rote application of algorithms.

The Toulmin model provides a common language for students to discuss their reasoning in all classrooms. Moreover, by saving individual teachers the time required to develop and implement norms for writing and classroom discussion, this common framework increases instructional time.

Challenging Tradition

Our experience suggests that high school literacy programs that focus on critical thinking can produce powerful results for urban students. In 2005, View Park students had the highest test scores among African American high school students in California (California Department of Education API, 2005). In addition, our African American students posted higher proficiency rates on the California English Language Arts exam than their white peers in the district did (California Department of Education STAR, 2005).

The success of a critical-thinking framework like the Toulmin model depends on a student-centered school in which all teachers agree on a common approach to accelerating improvement in literacy. With students entering high school so far behind, no teacher can single-handedly prepare them for college. Accelerated learning requires a sustained, collaborative effort in which all teachers reinforce the same set of critical-thinking skills. Strong instruction becomes the link that holds this teaching model together.

Basing adolescent literacy on critical thinking represents a radical departure from tradition, particularly for students performing below grade level. But the urgent need to improve the success rates of low-income students in high school and college demands radical changes in our expectations and in the way we support these students. At View Park, we have found that students rise to the challenge.

References

California Department of Education Academic Performance Index (API). (2005). Available: http://api.cde.ca.gov

California Department of Education Standardized Testing And Reporting (STAR) Program. (2005). Available: http://star.cde.ca.gov/star2005/viewreport.asp

Knight, E. (1968). *Poems from Prison*. Detroit, MI: Broadside Press.

Toulmin, S. (1958). *The Uses of Argument*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Endnote

[1] Teacher and student names are pseudonyms.