Teaching and Learning Argumentative Writing in High School English Language Arts Classrooms
Reviewed by Lindsay Jeffers
Western Michigan University
lindsay.j.jeffers@wmich.edu

Newell, Bloome, and Hirvela’s study on the teaching and learning of argumentative writing is the product of four years of extensive research. The authors examine how English language arts (ELA) teachers with excellent reputations teach argumentative writing in secondary schools and how their instructional practices shape student learning relative to that skill.

Collecting qualitative and quantitative data, the authors worked alongside ELA teachers in grades 9–12, using questionnaires to gather data from 31 classes across culturally and economically diverse schools in central Ohio. The authors then chose five teachers and their classes for a qualitative case study that included classroom observations and interviews with teachers and students. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which mandate the teaching of argumentative writing at the secondary grade level, pushes high school teachers to spend more curricular time on argumentation.

While the authors agree that argumentation is an essential skill, they find fault with the oversimplification of argumentative writing as it is described in the CCSS. The standards describe argumentative writing in terms of its structural features, framing features of writing for a scoring rubric that can be used for testing purposes (3). The authors also note that the CCSS “ignore the social context” of argumentative writing, which should consider audience as an essential aspect (3). In contrast, the authors focus on argumentative writing as a social practice rather than as a structure or a set of components.

Argumentative Writing in Real Classrooms
The first chapter of the book defines argumentative writing as a social practice focused on readers as an important context of the writing. Defining argumentative writing as a social practice provides a lens through which the authors view various classroom practices. The authors found that high school students were eager to express their opinions but often lacked support and evidence. Understanding appropriate social practices for argumentation may result in acceptance or rejection of an argument, and providing evidence and support for opinions is essential.

In Chapter 2, the authors examine what teachers in the case study believe about argumentation, explaining that some teachers approached argumentative writing as a structure, while others saw argumentation as “ideational,” focusing on evidence for ideas. A third group of teachers taught argumentative writing as a social process between writers and readers.

Having described these views of argumentation, the authors focus Chapter 3 on the instructional practices of teachers. Contrary to their original assumptions, they found that most teachers taught argumentative writing over an entire year, rather than as an isolated unit of study. One of their findings describes the
“instructional chain” practice of teachers: the ways lessons build and reoccur over time as they are integrated throughout the curriculum. The chapter also provides specific examples of the instructional chain to demonstrate how students build writing skills and a common language for argumentation.

Chapter 4 focuses on instructional conversations as the authors analyze snippets of classroom instruction and the dialogue between teachers and students. Through the analysis of these conversations, the authors point out the ways in which teachers construct argumentative writing as a social practice, involving students as participants in argumentation and providing them with a common language, that is, terms, to talk about evidence, support, warrants, and claims.

Chapter 5 continues this analysis of instruction, applying it to teacher assessments of student writing. In conversations with students, the teachers use a previously taught language of common terms (as noted above) to discuss components of successful argumentation. Student writing samples provide a point-by-point examination of the strengths and weaknesses of sample essays.

In Chapter 6, students and teachers discuss “rationality” in argumentation. The authors believe that rationality is especially necessary for argumentation as social practice because, to be successful, students must understand an issue in depth and have an open mind toward the views and arguments of others (159). Without an understanding of rationality, the authors contend that students will struggle to understand effective argumentation. The authors do not propose a “best practice” model of argumentative writing instruction (137). Rather, their analysis of the teaching of argumentative writing suggests that there is a wide variation of instructional practices that are successful with students. However, in all cases, the teachers provided strategies and a common language, and students then developed their own arguments.

Conclusions

Each class examined in this book is an example of effective teaching practices, but each is distinct, dependent on the teacher’s beliefs about argumentative writing, the teacher’s instructional practices, and the teacher’s assessment of writing. As a researcher in the teaching of writing, I found the data—which include classroom dialogue, student writing samples, interviews with teachers, and assignments given to students—to be comprehensive. This book provides an important glimpse of what is happening in high school classrooms when the focus is on argumentative writing, and the information provided may be beneficial for further research into the instructional practices of teachers. It will likely be useful to continuing studies by rhetoricians and compositionists interested in the practices of secondary teachers. It will also be useful for teachers who seek to understand a range of successful approaches to teaching argumentative writing that, in turn, can help them hone the approach they develop in their own classes.

Teaching, Affirming, and Recognizing Trans* and Gender Creative Youth: A Queer Literacy Framework

Reviewed by Ken Lindblom Stony Brook University kenneth.lindblom@stonybrook.edu

A growing number of scholars and teachers acknowledge that it is not enough for a teacher to be not racist. Instead, for teachers to be ethical and effective, teachers must be actively antiracist.

The premise of Teaching, Affirming, and Recognizing Trans* and Gender Creative Youth could be stated similarly: It is not enough to be not oppressive to students who do not conform to traditional understandings of gender. To be ethical and effective, teachers must create classroom contexts that affirm and support students whose gender identities do not fit rigid categories of male or female. To do otherwise “forces students who fall outside of those dominant identifiers to focus on simple survival rather than on success and fulfillment in school (Miller 2012; Miller and Gilligan 2014)” (6; italics in original).

The book starts with the compelling, heartbreaking, and eventually affirming tale of Blue, a child that students will struggle to understand effective argumentation. The authors do not propose a “best practice” model of argumentative writing instruction (137). Rather, their analysis of the teaching of argumentative writing suggests that there is a wide variation of instructional practices that are successful with students. However, in all cases, the teachers provided strategies and a common language, and students then developed their own arguments.

Conclusions

Each class examined in this book is an example of effective teaching practices, but each is distinct, dependent on the teacher’s beliefs about argumentative writing, the teacher’s instructional practices, and the teacher’s assessment of writing. As a researcher in the teaching of writing, I found the data—which include classroom dialogue, student writing samples, interviews with teachers, and assignments given to students—to be comprehensive. This book provides an important glimpse of what is happening in high school classrooms when the focus is on argumentative writing, and the information provided may be beneficial for further research into the instructional practices of teachers. It will likely be useful to continuing studies by rhetoricians and compositionists interested in the practices of secondary teachers. It will also be useful for teachers who seek to understand a range of successful approaches to teaching argumentative writing that, in turn, can help them hone the approach they develop in their own classes.
who experiences gender confusion. Though Blue is treated by others as a girl, Blue experiences life as a boy who is required to act as if a girl. The tale follows Blue through early childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, helping readers understand some of what a trans* youth suffers because of a society that doesn’t accept a continuum of gender identities. A poignant portrait, it alone makes it worth picking up this book and learning about Blue and Blue’s special relationship to the authors in the book. Blue’s story makes clear the high stakes involved. For no reason other than habit and cultural enforcement, a segment of society is held to unfair and oppressive mandates. A great deal of schooling reinforces these mandates and directly inflicts damage on trans* and gender creative youth. Unless teachers work to confront the oppression that occurs, unless it is made visible and confronted, we are complicit in inflicting that damage. We are wounding the children we teach.

Supporting Trans* and Gender Creative Youth

In this book, sj Miller presents a Queer Literacy Framework (QLF) that helps teachers create classrooms and design curriculum and assignments that confront gender oppression. Although parts of this book get bogged down in the technical language of cultural theory, the QLF itself is a set of ten, easy-to-understand principles, such as the following. The teacher:

• ... refrains from possible presumptions that students subscribe to a gender.

• ... engages in ongoing critique of how gender norms are reinforced in literature, media, technology, art, history, science, math, etc.

• ... believes that students who identify on a continuum of gender identities deserve to learn in environments free from bullying and harassment. (36)

The QLF works from kindergarten through graduate school, and it functions across disciplines. The value the QLF offers is clarified in the other chapters, which range from essays on using the QLF in elementary school—such as “Kindergarteners Studying Trans* Issues Through I Am Jazz” (Sullivan) and “BEYOND THIS OR THAT: Challenging the Limits of Binary Language in Elementary Education Through Poetry, Word Art, and Creative Book Making” (Hicks)—to secondary school—such as “The T* in LGBT*: Disrupting Gender Normative School Culture Through Young Adult Literature” (Cramer and Adams) and “Puncturing the Silence: Teaching The Laramie Project in the Secondary English Classroom” (Emert)—to higher education—such as “Teaching Our Teachers: Trans* and Gender Education in Teacher Preparation and Professional Development” (Brant). Other chapters address teaching foreign and second language instruction, transitional memoirs, trans*formative writing assignments, and Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night.

Complicating Gender

Those who identify comfortably with traditional gender identities (male or female) may not understand how complicated gender is, especially for those who do not fit the sanctioned versions of gender. As Miller asserts, this results at least partly from “trans* erasure,” attempts to limit discussion of or even acknowledge that some people do not fit rigid gender categories of either male or female (6). Blue’s story makes visible for readers the life of one person who experienced gender confusion (the confusion comes from the expectations of others, not from within Blue). But there are many other forms of trans* and gender creativity that people experience differently. Miller unpacks the acronym LGBTIAGCQ, which includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, agender/asexual, gender creative, and questioning (6). These terms—and dozens of others—are explained in the glossary (which includes a warning about terms that are considered offensive and may be used unwittingly by people unfamiliar with the continuum of gender identity). The glossary is an education in itself by making visible the oft-hidden complexity of gender.

“This Cannot Wait”

In the final chapter, “The Nonconclusion: Trans*ing Education in the Future—This Cannot Wait,” Miller synthesizes the previous chapters into recommendations for future research and teaching practices. Miller, again, invokes the stakes:

[T]rans*ing education cannot afford to wait any longer than it already has. Statistics of bullying, drop-out rates, truancy, lowered
grade point averages, mental health issues (Kosciw et al. 2014), and suicidal ideation, including attempts and completion, for trans* and gender creative youth (Ybarra et al. 2014) continue to surpass any population of teens to date. (293; italics in original)

Miller acknowledges that no school district is exactly like any other and recommends that district leaders provide professional development for teachers and bring in specialists to assist teachers in designing assignments that will support the trans*ing of curriculum. Miller also insists that teacher education programs include trans* pedagogy to ensure that new teachers are prepared to bring support, hope, and fairness to the classroom for all youth (295).

There is something refreshing about a book that is unflinching in its agenda and in the advice it provides to like-minded readers. While sj Miller’s introductory and concluding chapters offer arguments intended to convince readers of the importance of trans* pedagogy, the book focuses much more heavily on helping readers implement such a pedagogy in their classrooms. This reviewer came to the book already convinced of the need for a trans* pedagogy, and what he has learned from the QLF and its creative implementation will help him move forward in his own classes and programs.

If you are a teacher who is a member of the broadly defined trans* community, reading this book will likely affirm your experience and bring you closer to a professional community with which you may identify and draw from. If you are cisgender (a person who comfortably fits the gender identities sanctioned by the larger society), you should read this book to educate yourself, to learn to stop reinforcing a form of schooling that wounds trans* and gender creative youth, and embrace practices that help all children find fulfillment in school. The stakes here are life and death. This, as Miller asserts, cannot wait.

Lindsay Jeffers is a former high school English and Spanish teacher with a PhD in English education. A member of NCTE since 2006, Lindsay works with the Third Coast Writing Project at Western Michigan University and teaches composition at Grand Valley State University. Ken Lindblom is dean of the School of Professional Development and associate professor of English at Stony Brook University, and he is on the executive board of NCTE’s Conference on English Education. A member of NCTE since 1989, Ken was editor of English Journal from 2008 to 2013. Follow him @Klind2013.