

Minnesota Writing Project

--- Demonstration Lesson ---

Title: Beginning Argumentation through class discussion and debate

Grade appropriate: 7 – 12

Approximate Length of time to complete lesson/unit: Lesson 1 -- 20 minutes; Lesson 2 -- 30 – 40 minutes

Learning objectives and significance of lesson:

Lesson 1:

1. to demonstrate to students that they already know how to create an argument

Lesson 2:

2. to guide students to use graphic organizers in creating arguments
3. to engage students in a class debate as a way of preparing for writing
4. to encourage students to begin using transition words in a class debate as a bridge to using them later in their writing

Brief summary/outline:

These lessons can be used as part of a persuasive writing/speaking unit or a beginning debate unit.

Lesson 1: an introduction to argument

Increase students' awareness of the knowledge that they already possess to create arguments.

Activity: Bring in some edible/tangible prize (or extra credit points) that most students would desire.

Break them into groups of 4 -5 and give them 3 – 5 minutes to think of arguments in order to persuade the teacher that their group is the most deserving of the prize. Students write arguments on the board and the class analyzes arguments, looking for common strategies that were used. Primary focus is on getting students to look at the common strategies to create arguments. Depending on the level of students, the teacher might introduce formal terms for types of arguments; however, with beginning students just recognizing different ways of arguing is probably enough.

The next lesson would take place after students have gotten into the habit of having discussions on controversial issues and using non-fiction text to find evidence to back up arguments. This also could take place as students are getting into a beginning debate unit.

Lesson 2: classroom discussion/debate using sentence stems

1. *Practice finding evidence to back an argument.* Begin the day with a journal question on a controversial topic about which your students probably do not have much knowledge (Such as “Should the penny be eliminated from U.S. currency?”). Then find out who needs more information before you have a classroom debate. If students are hooked on debate by this point, they will be motivated to gain more facts before the discussion. Hand out a short article (preferably one that shows points for both sides) to students. Students must read the article and choose one side to support by finding several reasons and some evidence to back them up. One option is to have them complete some type of graphic organizer to organize their arguments and evidence. Find a graphic organizer with space for reasons and for evidence to back them. Most research suggests that these are a good way to make students aware of argument structure.
2. *Four corners discussion.* Next, propose a position statement (Such as “The penny should be eliminated from the U.S. currency” or “The words ‘under God’ should be removed from the

Pledge of Allegiance.”) for the controversial topic and write it on the board. In advance have signs up in four corners of your rooms: *I agree, I strongly agree, I disagree, and I strongly disagree*. Ask students to walk to the corner that shows their opinion toward the position statement. For students who cannot decide at first, I let the center of the classroom be a neutral zone, but they must make a move toward one of the corners in the course of the discussion. I also allow students to move to a different corner if their opinion changes during the discussion. Afterwards, it is helpful to talk about what caused people’s views to change—a good argument? A strong piece of evidence? A good example?

3. *Use sentence stems to facilitate discussion.* After having students prepare for a class discussion on a controversial topic (as in # 2 above), hand out the stem sentences for classroom discussion (attachment), and explain that they should try to use these when they are participating in the discussion. If you have already discussed transitions in your class, students will recognize these. Point out the different categories and even practice them before the discussion begins. Remind them to try to let the audience know whose previous comment they are commenting on. I originally created this document for my ESL students, but some of my regular students began asking for “those sheets that make us sound smart when we talk,” so I continued promoting it with all of my students.

Related Resources:

Dickson, R. (2004) “Developing real-world intelligence: Teaching argumentative writing through debate.” *English Journal*, 94, 34-40.

Felton, Mark K. & Herko, Suzanne (2004) “From Dialogue to Two-Sided Argument: Scaffolding Adolescents’ Persuasive Writing.” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Vol. 47. *Authors use an 11th grade class to show in detail how to scaffold a persuasive paper from debate activities.*

Graff, Gerald & Birkenstein, Cathy. “They Say/I Say.” New York: W.W. Norton & Co. 2007
Written by college profs as a set of tools for entering into argument with user-friendly templates.

Petit, A., & Soto, E. (2002). “Already experts: Showing students how much they know about writing and reading arguments.” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 45, 674–682.

Graphic Organizers

- <http://www.region15.org/curriculum/pwp.pdf>

Good source for persuasive writing/speaking graphic organizers (middle school – high school)

- http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/persuasion_map/

An online interactive graphic organizer for preparing a persuasive essay or debate

Some resources for beginning debate

- www.idebate.org

Check out their database by topics; they present arguments on both sides and links for further research

- www.middleschooldebate.com -- A good beginning site for parliamentary debate

www.nmsa.org/Publications/MiddleSchoolJournal/Articles/May2007/Article2/tabid/1420/Default.aspx -- An explanation of how to begin using debate in a middle school/early high school classroom

Possible extensions or adaptations for different purposes/student needs:

Depending on the popularity of the topic, I sometimes assign sides to research in order to have a balance on each side. This also helps if you are preparing to do debates.

For additional information, contact:

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