

CHALK TALK: A Teacher's Voice

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At the first Republican presidential debate, Donald Trump was asked to provide evidence to support his provocative statement that “The Mexican Government is forcing their most unwanted people into the United States. They are, in many cases, criminals, drug dealers, rapists, etc.”

Trump's reply: “If it weren't for me, you wouldn't even be talking about illegal immigration.” After moderator Chris Wallace gave him another opportunity to supply evidence, Trump answered, “Border patrol, people that I deal with, that I talk to, they say this is what's happening,” followed by references to our leaders as “stupid” and a swipe at the media for good measure.



Now I'm no debate teacher, but I don't think Trump supplied convincing evidence to support his claim.

Trump is an easy target, but the episode did not leave me feeling confident that we'll be seeing exemplary models of political argumentation from many candidates for students following this race.

I've been thinking a lot about argumentation since I began co-facilitating a team of eight area educators in studying argumentation writing in the sciences. Our two-year inquiry, funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education through the National Writing Project, has us examining in detail what constitutes reliable evidence, effective reasoning, convincing responses to counterclaims and consideration of author's role and audience. We work with other teams from California, Pennsylvania, New York, and Delaware, spending hours on each element of effective argument writing while also learning the Next Generation Science Standards and the eight Science and Engineering Practices they espouse.

One of those practices, “engaging in argument from evidence,” echoes one of the practices in the current Frameworks for Mathematics: “Construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others.” The Frameworks for English Language Arts and Literacy, along with those from History and Social Science, also call for effective writing and analysis of argumentation. Because it is the one skill that is common to all of these disciplines, there is great potential for crossover teaching of argumentation; when students see evidence and reasoning valued in their science, math, social

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studies and English classes, they'll be more likely to adopt good habits of argumentation as their own.

Our team has already seen some of these habits come through in the work produced by students. They are being thoughtful in their scientific arguments, which range from which skateboard ramps are more dangerous than others, to linking air quality and the incidence of asthma in Springfield. Students are thinking about the elements of argument, but also about their thinking, and it is impressive. Part of our work moving forward is determining how to share what we've learned from our study and our students with other educators - not just science teachers - about how to teach argument writing.

As part of our inquiry, we read the book *They Say/I say*, by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein. This book, used at many colleges and high schools, aims to help students become "critical, intellectual thinker(s) who...can participate in the debates and conversations of your world in an active and empowered way." As the title implies, the book helps students express not only their own views, but to acknowledge, examine, and thoughtfully rebut the views of others (the "they say"). In doing so, it "asks writers not simply to keep proving and reasserting what they already believe, but to stretch what they believe by putting it up against beliefs that differ, sometimes radically, from their own." This is not easy to do, and teaching this habit of mind will require modeling it. Fortunately, teachers are experienced at modeling skills their students will need to demonstrate.

I'm hopeful this new emphasis on argumentation across disciplines will take off. As Graff and Birkenstein contend, "In an increasingly diverse, global society, this ability to engage with the ideas of others is especially crucial to democratic citizenship." It's hard to argue with that.

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