CONTEXTS FOR ARGUMENT

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What kind of writing do students produce when given a task that implies—to teachers and assessors—the writing of "argument"? Does this vary by grade and/or ability level? How and why? These are some of the questions that guided our reanalysis of writing produced in several Board-wide research and evaluation projects in Ontario: for each project, the participants included all students in grades 5, 8, and 12 (both 12 General and 12 Advanced). For two of the studies, half the subjects wrote narratives on topics of their own choosing. The task for all other participants was to respond to an argumentative prompt: briefly, students were asked to focus on anything in their school, their home-life, or the world at large that needed changing, and to write a piece arguing for such a change.

Analysis of all scripts showed remarkable development over the years—according to affective, cognitive, and linguistic measures. There was also increasing mastery of the conventional schema for the type of discourse attempted, story or argument, with the following difference: By grade 8, nearly all students could write stories that embodied conventional narrative form; in contrast, while there was significant development from grades 5 to 8 to 12G to 12A, even for the 12As, only 65% of the

arguments looked like traditional arguments. Our reanalysis of the data suggested the following possible interpretations: First, as opposed to their rich experience with narratives, students are exposed to almost no models of argument—even in high school. Consequently, without an organizing schema, many students wrote expressively. At the same time, students are increasingly exposed to potentially distracting models—in the discourse of advertising and propaganda. Hence, we found an increased number of persuasive, rather than argumentative pieces (to use Kenneavy's distinction).

Second, appropriate argumentative form involves a cognitive act on the part of the writer that is much like what Vygotsky describes as central to concept-formation—i.e., the ability to see and name the common, abstract bond underlying a set of data. This kind of abstracting becomes more and more difficult as the nature of the data to be abstracted from becomes more abstract. Third, the task—a typical English composition class assignment—may itself be more difficult than those involved in pedagogy and assessment normally acknowledge. We found far more success among students who chose to write discipline-specific arguments. Perhaps arguments are most fruitfully elicited in discipline-specific classes where concepts are presented within hierarchic systems, and lines of reasoning are modeled throughout the course. Teachers and assessors must consider the possibility that, at least for arguments, children learn to write in the content-area classroom and only later, and as a result, is that learning transferred to the kind of writing typically elicited in the composition class.