How to get Argument Protocols Up and Going in Reading Workshop

The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project has been exploring ways to weave the teaching of argument through the curriculum. Even the youngest students can argue about literature and so some of the new work at the Project has been around trying to develop protocols for how students might take positions and debate about literature, supporting their arguments with reasons and evidence from the texts. The sample lesson plan represents what has come out of this exploration so far. You’ll see it is framed as an argument read aloud where the students are told an argument about the story before it starts and then asked to take a position as they listen. Following the read aloud, they are introduced to a protocol for debating which is similar to the structure of formal debates but offers more scaffolding in the form of time to plan with people who share the same position at multiple points. The aim is to create a structure of teaching which creates an urgent feeling for the need to argue and support positions, sky-high engagement and support for all learners.

Argument Read Aloud

Set up a Debate About a Text in Class

Let students know that this read aloud will be different in that it will be an argument read aloud in which students are listening to think about their position on an argument.

“We are going to do a special kind of read aloud today. We aren’t going to just read and think about the story and the characters. Instead, we are going to do an argument read aloud which means that you will keep an argument about the text in mind the entire time you are listening to the story and think about what your position on the argument would be. I am going to tell you the argument before we start and as you listen, you can think about what your position is and WHY.”

Introduce the book you will be reading (in this case, The Giving Tree) and tell the students the argument that they will be considering as they listen.

“Okay, so we are going to read this book The Giving Tree.” I held the book up. “Thumbs up if you know this story.” Many thumbs went up, and I nodded. “So it seems that a lot of you know this story. Well, for those of you who don’t know it, I want to tell you that The Giving Tree is the title of the book but also one of the characters. So, our argument is about this character—the Tree. I’ll tell you the argument that people have about this Tree. Some people say that the Tree is strong. And some people say that the Tree is weak. As you listen today, will you be thinking about that question—Is the Giving Tree strong or weak? And those of you who already know the story are probably forming some ideas but as you listen today I want you to be thinking about WHY you have those ideas—what are your reasons and evidence for your position? Okay, are you thinking about that question—Is the Giving Tree strong or weak? Okay, here we go...”
Help Students Create an Argument as You Read Aloud

As you read, highlight places by thinking aloud or by asking students to stop/jot and/or turn/talk where students might be pushed to think more deeply about the argument at hand. Choose places where evidence can be seen to support either side and/or might bolster the side that you suspect will be less popular.

When reading the Giving Tree, you might stop, for example, at (pages are not numbered):

“And every day the boy would come” – “Hmmm...these illustrations are so interesting, right? It’s almost like the tree is using her branches like arms, like she’s a person. And I know since the author Shel Silverstein, is also the illustrator, these are very deliberate choices. So this is making me think that I need to pay careful attention to both the illustrations and the text to consider what position I am taking on this argument.”

“And the boy loved the tree very much.
And the tree was happy.” --“Let’s pause for a second to think about what we know about the tree so far and what we’re thinking about her. Does she seem strong or weak? Make some notes to yourself about what you’re thinking about the argument so far. So you might write, for example, So far, I’m taking the position that the Tree is...because...”

“And so the boy climbed up the tree and gathered her apples and carried them away.
And the tree was happy.” --“Let’s stop again for a few minutes and think about that question—is the Giving Tree strong or weak? What your position so far? Turn to the person next to you and talk about what you’re thinking.”

“cut off her trunk and made a boat and sailed away”—“Look over your notes and decide what you’re thinking right now. Stop and jot about your position and why. Revise or add to your notes.”

After the text, give students a few minutes to consider question and make their decision. Then ask them to form two groups—those who agree with Position A on one side of the room and those who agree with Position B on the other side of the room.

“Okay, everyone. So now we are going to form positions. Take a minute to think about your position on this argument—is the Giving Tree strong or weak? Thumbs up when you have your position. So Position A (I gestured to the left) is the position that says ‘I take the position that the Giving Tree is strong’. And Position B (I gestured to the right) is the position that says ‘I take the position that the Giving Tree is weak’. In a minute, we’re going to form teams—everyone who takes Position A on the left side of the room and everyone who takes Position B on the right side of the room. Once you get there, each group should form a straight line. Okay, go!”

Make sure to make the two sides as equal as possible; encourage students to take the challenge of taking a position with which they might not agree at first.

“Now, one of the most important things to know is that to be a truly great debater you have to be able to argue for a position that you might not have at first staked. So, I’m going to ask a few of you on the ___ side to move. ”

Have the two lines approach each other and stand facing each other. This person will be your opponent.

“Now the two lines need to approach each other.” When the two lines were facing each other, I continued. “Shake hands with the person across from you. This person will be your opponent.”

Teachers, you may choose to do more than one round of this debate activity, pushing the students to get stronger at each go. If this is the case, then you will want to provide alternate directions when assigning opponents. You might say:

“Okay, everyone, we are going to do this activity twice. The first time we’ll do it, your opponent will be the person across from you right now. Now everyone on line A, take one step to the right. Last person on line B, you go to the front. Okay, you are all now facing your second round opponent. Shake hands. Okay. Say the name of and point to your first opponent. Good. Say the name of and point to your second opponent.”
Let Students Know How a Debate Goes and Begin!

Let students know that as a class, they will all be going through this process together. Show a process chart and briefly review the major parts to the process and explain to students that you will provide more details as they go through the process.

“I’m going to give you a quick overview into how this process of debating will go before we start, but then we will go through each part together. I have a chart here to help you remember what each part of the process will be like,” I uncovered a chart.

Steps Involved in Arguing About Texts

Listen to text(s) and gather evidence and ideas so as to take a position

Caucus with those who share your position to plan what your claim, evidence, reasons will be, referring to the text

State your case in front of your opponent, explain your position with reasons, evidence

Caucus with those who share your position in order to plan a point-by-point rebuttal of your opponent’s position

Rebut each point from each opponent

Second Round or Conclude by creating a new position statement on which both opponents can agree and flashdraft

Teachers, you will note that we are suggesting to use a format which is similar to the structure of formal debates but differs in ways that offer more scaffolds. Our intention is to give students time to plan with others who take the same position, and also to create an urgent, intense, engaging process that supports students becoming more at home with the positioning and conversational moves that are integral to debate.

“Okay, everyone, so as you can see, you’ll have time to be in a caucus and plan how to support your position with people who share your position. Then you’ll have time to state your case to your opponent and take notes while your opponent states his/her case. After that you’ll go back to caucus with those who share your position and plan how to rebut each of your opponent’s points. Then you’ll rebut your opponent.”

Have students go off into same position teams to caucus and plan and gather reasons and evidence to support their position. Reach for a metaphor (in this case, going into battle) to illustrate the importance of preparation.

“So, right now before you debate, you will get a chance to plan and prepare. It’s like you are going into battle and you need some ammunition and your ammunition is your reasons and your evidence. So you will caucus with your same position team and work together to prepare how you will argue your case. I have some highlighters and you have a copy of the text in your packet and you can mark it up and write all over it.”

Give students time to go through each part of the process. Keep students aware of time by announcing when it is each opponent’s time to speak and when there is only a bit of time left in a part of the process.

“In a minute you’ll meet with your opponent and lay out your case. Each of you has two minutes to do that. Opponent A, you’ll go first. While your opponent is speaking, it’s a good idea to take notes so you can remember the main points your opponent makes. I’ll let you know when you should switch. If you finish early, you can each go back to your caucus and start planning how you will rebut or talk back to your opponent’s points. Okay, go meet with your opponent!”

Remind students that time is almost up for stating cases and they need to go back to caucus and plan their rebuttal.

“Debators, can I have your eyes and attention? You should be finishing up laying out your cases and then moving back into your caucus. That’s your time to get some help to figure out how to rebut the points your opponent just made. So you can go back to your caucus and say, ‘Help! These are the points my opponent made! How can I rebut these? Or you can say, ‘I have a great way for rebutting some of the points my opponent made. Let me share.’ Okay, meet back with your caucus for some group support. Go!’”

Move students into rebutting their opponents.

“You are going to meet with your opponent and rebut each of the points your opponent made. You want to show why each point your opponent made was not strong or does not make sense. You each have two minutes. Opponent A, you go first. I’ll let you know when you should switch. If you finish early, you can go back to where your caucus met and think about what went well in your debating and start thinking about what a goal might be for what you want to do better during our future debates.”

Concluding the Debate

You might have your students go through a second round of debating with a new opponent. Alternatively, you might conclude the argument by having the opponents become partners and work together to create a Position C, a more nuanced statement that each partner can agree with and then draft a flashdraft essay (either tandem or independently).

- Kelly Boland Hohne