Let’s see what we find out, when kids write a series of argument essays. These three essays were each written by the same child, in one period, in class, as flash drafts, in a pilot of the forthcoming unit of study on *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grade by Grade: A Yearlong Curriculum for Narrative, Information, and Opinion Writing* (Heinemann, 2013). This student, Jack, was eleven years old. He was a beginning of the year sixth grader in our pilots, and we used his writing, with others, to show students in fifth and sixth grade.

Among the texts the students encountered were two digital texts, which are available on this website under Resources/Book Lists-Text Sets/Digital Archives

http://readingandwritingproject.com/resources/classroom-libraries.html

The first text was a video put out by the Midwest Dairy Association, lauding the value of chocolate milk as a source of vitamins and nutrients. The second was a video of Jamie Oliver filling a school bus with sugar, to show how much sugar kids consume across a year of drinking chocolate milk.
Query 1

The first questions I would ask would be: what has this child, Jack, already learned about opinion/argument writing? What does this child do well?

Flash draft #1 was written after the students had seen the texts but had not yet been taught new strategies. The task was to prepare to persuade their teachers and principal that the school should, or should not, continue to offer chocolate milk in the cafeteria.

Mary’s Response

When you see your students carrying forward skills from prior years, run to the classrooms of those teachers, and tell them what their former students are doing well. We don’t give enough detailed positive feedback to our colleagues. In this case, these students hadn’t had an essay unit yet this year — so everything the kid does well in terms of persuasive writing, comes from prior instruction.

I would want to run find last year’s writing teacher, and heap praise on this valiant educator, for how much this student has internalized about structure, about audience appeal, and for how strongly this child believes that his voice matters. Very cool. Does Jack actually incorporate text evidence yet?

Nope. That’s what he’ll learn in this unit. If most of my students’ on-demand writing looked like this at the beginning of the unit, I’d be thrilled at their writing skills. I might be thoughtful about their reading skills, or their expectations that they should actually incorporate what they read into their thinking, and I would roll up my sleeves for that work.

But does he come to the unit already knowing a lot about persuasive writing and essays in general, and with some solid control of conventions as well? Yes!

Student Response

Schools should keep serving chocolate milk to us! I love chocolate milk, and my friends love chocolate milk! Everyone loves chocolate milk. They make strawberry milk as well, and they should serve that too. We should serve chocolate milk because it tastes good and because it has some good vitamins.

Chocolate milk tastes like... chocolate! Who doesn’t like chocolate? Everyone likes chocolate. Go to a Duane Reade or a Starbucks or a Dean and Delucca. What do you see at the counter, luring in the kiddies and the adults? CHOCOLATE. Chocolate makes us happy. School does not always make us happy. So keep serving chocolate milk. It is an oasis of sweetness. I think even the teachers would find they liked school more, if they drank more chocolate milk.

In addition, chocolate milk has some stuff that’s good for you. It has vitamins, and calcium. Put away those sodas and gatorade. Drink milk. Just exercise too, and the sugar will melt away, leaving only the happiness.
Query 2

The next question I would ask would be: how much improvement can I expect, in response to clear teaching? What do the kids get better at and where do I see evidence of these skills?

Flash draft #2 was written one week later, after the students had been studying strategies for incorporating text evidence. The major impetus of the teaching was to shift students from opinion and preferences to claim and evidence. See what you think:

Mary’s Response

If I were this teacher, I would be really happy to see the shift from persuasive opinion to reasoned argument here. For most of the essay, the writer leans on text evidence. The structure is good too – as with the first draft, this flash draft forecasts upcoming development in the introduction, and lays out a clear train of thought for the reader.

There is something whacky going on with Jack’s analysis of text evidence. The ‘famous nutritionist,’ is, we know, the one representing the Midwest Dairy Association. And the sidebar into the kids’ attractiveness and the personal anecdote about what happened when the child was deprived of chocolate milk takes the reader pretty astray.

Great voice, limited discipline here for the logic of elaborating arguments. I would wonder, in fact, if we were bumping into a reading problem. It feels as if the kid knows how to construct an argument (though perhaps not how to end it), but is shaky on analyzing texts.

Student Response

Schools should keep serving chocolate milk for young children. There should be chocolate milk because kids like it, it gives vitamins, and it gets kids in good habits. I do like chocolate milk. But that’s not why schools should serve it. Research shows that chocolate milk is pretty good for kids.

First I’ll explain why its important that kids like chocolate milk. It turns out that more kids drink milk, when they can get chocolate milk. When you interview a lot of parents, like Katie Couric did, they’ll say that their kids only drink milk if they can get chocolate milk. So at least they’re drinking milk.

Next I’ll show how chocolate milk turns out to have vitamins. A famous nutritionist shows that chocolate milk is a good source of vitamin A, D, E, and calcium. That’s a lot of vitamins and they’re in something you actually like to drink! This famous nutritionist has two kids, and she lets them drink chocolate milk, and those kids look pretty healthy. One girl has really white teeth and shiny hair. This nutritionist works for the Dairy Association, so she must have studied how good milk is for you.

There’s one more reason why chocolate milk should be served in schools. The famous nutritionist showed that chocolate milk has a lot less sugar and carbohydrates than soda and power drinks like gatorade. So if kids get in the habit of drinking milk in school, then they’ll probably skip the sodas outside of school. The famous nutritionist didn’t actually say this as a fact. This is my interpretation, but it was the facts her kids pointed out about how soda has more sugar, that made me think of it.

That’s why we should keep serving chocolate milk at our middle school – it gets kids to drink milk, it gives us vitamins, and it builds good habits. Now that’s all clear, as an aside, last spring my fifth grade studied chocolate milk, and we ended up having no chocolate milk in the cafeteria in June, and it was a bummer. I just stopped drinking period. Until we were allowed to go out to lunch in the spring of fifth grade, and then I started going out for pizza and a coke, and one reason is because there was NO CHOCOLATE MILK. What about that, Jamie Oliver? Jamie is a famous English chef who for some reason also makes lunch for kids in schools in Los Angeles. He showed that a bus full of sugar sort of compares to how much sugar we get from chocolate milk in school. But if you start making those comparisons, we wouldn’t be able to eat anything from school lunches. In fact, the vitamins from chocolate milk are probably the only ones we get in our school lunch. So keep chocolate milk, our main source of vitamins, good habits, and happiness.
Mary’s Response

I love the incorporation of primary research as well as reading in this near final draft. You can see that Jack interviewed some classmates, or did a survey. He has also learned a ton about how to talk into and talk back to texts. This time his analysis of the Jamie Oliver text is much more...analytical. He's still pretty swayed by that famous nutritionist, but his positioning of this text is more strategic. There is also a lot of attention to verbs, such as 'suggest,' 'shows,' that indicates a writer who is more thoughtful about what his text evidence really does. I would also say there is more discipline, more of an attention to logic and reasoning and evidence.

What next? If the teacher had more time in the unit of study, I might suggest teaching the students some lessons about audience appeal, and how to tailor your examples and vocabulary for specific audiences. Jack actually did that in his first flash draft, and as he focused on other work, he somewhat dropped it by his third flash draft. I might also consider how much citation I’d want kids to do.

At the very least, I’d expect this essay to have endnotes. If it’s going to be a letter or a panel presentation, then perhaps a more informal reference might be okay. The writer does make it clear he is referring to texts - but seems unsure right now how to cite those. Finally, there was some slippery math in the Dairy Association text, and I might consider looking at that in science or math class, and looking at how numbers were used in that argument. Sometimes kids are less critical of statistics when they encounter them outside those disciplines.

All in all, very cool work for an eleven year old. Gives us hope for increasing their argument skills. And makes me want to go read the back of my milk carton.

Mary Ehrenworth

October 2012