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The Persuasive Art of Responding

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The Persuasive Art of Responding

Abstract

This practitioner research study looked at how elementary students created persuasive arguments in response to their reading of Doll Bones. Students frequently used settings to ground their arguments. This study suggests that having students persuasively respond to reading serves as a bridge or scaffold to persuasive writing.

It was all the doll.

Lukas Kerchner is proof that the doll is alive. They found his name on Eleanor's grave. They also found a story on Lukas Kerchner by the pottery down in the basement of the library. Something that I also noticed is that in the beginning her eyes are closed and in the end her eyes are wide open. How did the camp get trashed? Why are people looking at her as a person? Why is the doll moving? Why does all the evidence lead up to the doll being alive? If you ask me, it was all the doll. It was all Eleanor and it was all her fault.

Morgan, a fifth grade student, was convinced that the doll, Eleanor, from *Doll Bones* (Black, 2013) was alive and led the children within this narrative on a quest to bury her. Her synthesis of reasons showcased how she used text evidence to persuade others of her opinion. Her argument was developed when fifth grade students were perplexed about whether the doll led the quest or if another character initiated it. In response to their reading and because they had varying opinions about who led the quest, students constructed arguments with supporting evidence from the book. These opinions and responses from students led to their teacher creating a study to discover how they constructed their arguments within their written responses.

The type of writing constructed by Morgan is considered persuasive, as its goal is to convince someone about the merits of her argument (McCann, 2014). Persuasion is centered in reading, writing, and conversing. In reading, students read persuasive texts, in writing they create them, and in argumentative conversation they learn to orally elucidate their stance about a topic (McCann, 2014; Read, Landon-Hays, & Martin-Rivas, 2014). However, most of the classroom-based focus on persuasion is centered in writing. For example, the Common Core expects that students will be able to write argumentatively through opinion pieces on topics that support a point of view (National Governors

Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.1a).

However, even though persuasive writing is a writing genre that students are expected to master, it is difficult to construct for a variety of reasons, but the most fundamental one is that teachers offer a more dominant focus on narrative and report writing (Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Wollman-Bonilla, 2004). Therefore, students are not as familiar with this genre and struggle when trying to write for this purpose (Gillespie, Olinghouse, & Graham, 2013; Read, Landon-Hays, & Marin-Rivas, 2014). Further, many teachers feel inadequate and poorly prepared to teach writing and with writing instruction positioned behind reading and mathematics because of assessment-driven curriculum, they limit their instruction to narratives or reports (Curtis, 2017). As a result, when teachers engage students with persuasive writing, students are often asked to build arguments for issues like longer recesses, better lunches, and other topics that while appealing leave few opportunities to create authentic arguments (Philippakos & MacArthur, 2016).

Further, persuasive writing requires that students are aware of their audience, as they must address their arguments to specific groups or individuals to be convincing. As students draft their arguments, they are required to address potential alternative perspectives in their thinking to strengthen their arguments (Moore & MacArthur, 2012). However, most students fail to think about their audience and their unique perspectives when constructing their persuasive pieces (Felton & Kuhn, 2001) and teachers find it challenging to scaffold instruction for them when they encounter these difficulties (Curtis, 2017).

While persuasive pieces can be difficult to write, students are engaged with argument and are excited to share their ideas and beliefs (Felton & Herko, 2004; Radcliffe, 2012). Felton and Herko offer that while students are passionate about orally sharing their ideas, they find it difficult to effectively translate them to a cogent argument on paper. Although persuasive writing is challenging for students to complete successfully, writing persuasively is important to school success. Academic classes like science and social studies require this way of thinking and writing (Moore & MacArthur, 2012) when students are engaged in disciplinary literacy.

With this background in mind, Becky, a classroom teacher wondered what would happen if persuasive writing became a part of reading response where the cognitive challenges with persuasive essay writing were reduced? Through this process, the expectations for persuasive writing were shifted so rather than

expecting students to write a persuasive essay, they were asked to use persuasion in responding to their reading? For example, when an author left gaps in his or her writing for interpretation, not all students construed the events in the same way. What if when this situation happened, students responded by using text evidence and visual representations to finalize their interpretation?

Crafting the Study

This exploration is grounded in practitioner research where the teacher observes students during learning experiences and then based on these observations systematically studies the learning event. Practitioner research has a long tradition in classrooms and in particular with literacy explorations (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Importantly, teacher research is not a small-scale version of academic research. This research grows from actual classroom experiences where the teacher is curious about a learning experience or potential experience and because of this curiosity creates a space during instructional time to investigate. The goal of these investigations is to find information surrounding instruction, in this case literacy instruction, to share with others interested in such instruction in a public forum. The research findings are to be shared outside the classroom or school environment so that other teachers can benefit from the new knowledge (Newkirk, 1992).

The teacher researcher in this study was known for leadership and her constant practitioner research in literacy (Fichtman Dana, 2016). She carefully watched students as they were engaged in student-directed literacy activities such as book club (Barone & Barone, 2016). She believed that students are meaning makers and her instruction was guided by social interactions she had with students. She provided leadership in instruction and she also created room for students to shape instruction (Pappas & Zecker, 2001).

For this exploration, she observed students as they created arguments for their book interpretations and wondered about how students engaged in this process. She hypothesized that as students built a persuasive case for their reading interpretations, their thinking and writing could serve as a bridge to more formal, persuasive writing. In essence, they utilized information revealed in a text to guide their interpretive position and argue for their view. These arguments, while not formal essays, required the same skill set necessary for essay writing. For instance, students created an argument using text support and visual representation for evidence. Later, when students constructed formal essays, they would use text evidence to frame their arguments similarly to what they did in this

process. This process allowed them the necessary practice and served as a foundation or transition for later persuasive writing.

To answer her research question – How do students craft persuasive arguments in response to their reading? - she took on a pragmatic stance as she collected student products and listened into their conversations (Gordon, 2016; Gordon, Stiegelbauer, & Diehl, 2008). Her goal was to determine how students used book response to develop persuasive thinking. Her systematic exploration allowed for her to witness how students constructed their arguments and if the experience supported current and future learning. She asked a university researcher to join her in this investigation to establish more rigorous data collection. This addition supported the teacher, as the university researcher did not have to teach and simultaneously collect data. After data was collected both the teacher and university researcher analyzed it.

Structuring the Persuasive Response Activity

We explored how sixty, fifth grade students created a persuasive response. The students were enrolled in a public school in a large, urban school district. Their teacher collaborated with another fifth grade teacher for instruction. Students had reading, social studies, and science instruction with one teacher and the other teacher taught writing and math. The teachers organized their instruction so they met each group of students for half of each day.

For literacy instruction, the students spent the majority of their time in literary conversation groups (Barone & Barone, 2017) where they read, discussed, and wrote about their books on a daily basis. They also participated in whole group and small group instruction each day. The students engaged in daily independent reading and were supported by extensive classroom and school libraries.

At the end of the year, the teacher varied her instruction to include reading the book *Doll Bones* (Black, 2013) to the students as they read along. She utilized this structure so that all students could participate, even those receiving instruction in special education settings. She wanted all the students to have the experience of engaging in grade level thinking as they participated with this book.

Doll Bones was chosen purposely as Black created ambiguity in her book and much of the mystery is left open for readers' interpretations. This vagueness made it a strong choice for persuasive response. Within *Doll Bones*, there were three children as the main characters, Zack, Poppy, and Alice. At the beginning of

the novel, the three often played together with action figures. Zach's dad ended this collaborative play as he threw away Zach's action figures. He saw the toys as babyish and wanted his son to engage in more boy-associated sports like basketball. Poppy's family owned an old bone-china doll that the children called the Great Queen. Poppy shared with her friends that the doll was haunted and that the only way to make her happy was to return her ground-up bones to her gravesite. This need led the three on an adventure to bury her. Throughout the journey, the characters were troubled by whether the doll was just a doll or if she was controlling the journey. This conundrum became a focus for the fifth graders, similar to the characters, as they read the book, particularly when the quest began to bury the doll.

There were two identified explanations about who was leading the quest. One point of view was that Poppy wanted the threesome to continue to play together since Zach did not want to engage anymore. The second point of view was that the doll was controlling the children. Throughout the book, students continuously questioned and challenged each other about their positions. Students marked their books with post-it notes to provide evidence to support their claims. This recording of information was all done without teacher prompting. Debates arose and students argued their side to support their thoughts. Because of this student led action, the class decided that the final project would have to confront this dilemma.

After the book was completed, students clarified their positions on their views about who was controlling the quest, the doll or Poppy. Because of this serendipitous situation, their teacher decided to explore how students persuasively responded to a book by providing evidence for their opinion. She believed that persuasive responses to reading, because of the necessity for close reading to find text evidence, enriched the opportunities for students to better understand a novel. Through this process, students were provided a bridge, the use of text evidence from a novel, to offer practice in understanding how to craft a more formal, persuasive essay. Later, when they wrote persuasive essays, they used similar strategies. They talked with each other and found text evidence to support their opinions from multiple sources, both paper and electronic. Each piece of evidence was used within their more formal writing and they often chatted with other students as they built their case of evidence.

For the final book project, the teacher asked each student to create a poster that represented the children's quest in the book and to provide an argument for their interpretation – the doll in control or Poppy in control of the journey for their final project. Further, she encouraged them to select important scenes as a basis

for their arguments as the scenes provided activity that could be used as evidence. In response, the students used scenes to map the quest. For each scene, text evidence was needed to support their claim using actions, quotes, or examples from the text. Following their multimodal poster creation, students shared their responses with each other, trying to convince one another of their interpretation and the quality of their supportive data. They had the opportunity to engage in a debate using their posters as their evidence. Students convened in their small groups and found the best examples to help them debate. Unlike where students write persuasive pieces by engaging in conversation first and then writing, these students talked throughout their reading, wrote, talked, and wrote in a recursive style. Through this process, students viewed fellow students as experts and also their audience. They used these ongoing conversations to reach their goal to be convincing in their arguments.

Analyzing the Posters

Once all the posters were completed, the teacher and university researcher carefully viewed and read each poster. We then sorted them by who students thought controlled the quest. Following this analysis, we spent time carefully considering the posters where the doll was in charge of the quest since they represented the majority of responses. We looked for the ways students constructed their arguments and used these to reveal the findings of this investigation. We analyzed the posters multiple times as categories were refined from original thinking. For instance, in early rounds of analysis we focused singly on their arguments. Then, we revisited the posters to see how students integrated visual and textual information to construct their arguments. We discovered how there was a progression in their representations with some students showcasing each event as discrete and others carefully building a more complete argument. Overall, the analysis was recursive where we viewed each poster, sorted, discussed, resorted, discussed, until we believed we had a careful interpretation of the arguments crafted by students.

Discoveries: The Art of Persuading Others

In the end only three students persisted in their belief that Poppy, a major character, was in control of all of the quest's aspects. What was interesting about these responses was that they had less text support to honor their opinions. For instance, they were convinced that it was Poppy leading the quest and she arranged for the doll to open her eyes, be moved, and other events noted about the doll's control within the book. These students also felt that Poppy set up the situations to convince the other characters that the doll might be in charge so that

the three continued to play their game. As a representative example of these responses, one student wrote, “I think Poppy is possessed but she is in charge. She makes it look like the doll is doing human things.” While this opinion was interesting, it lacked rich text support to convince others. It also failed to explain how she became possessed and who was in charge when a person is possessed. For instance, students argued, was Poppy really leading the quest if she was possessed by the doll?

The remaining 57 responses all targeted the Queen or the doll as in charge of the action. The dominant reasons for their decision were specific actions as detailed in scenes in the book. For the most part, students noted that some people could see the doll and thought she was a person, she trashed the campground, she found her grave, and she was responsible for the major characters sharing dreams.

Using Key Scenes to Ground an Argument

The use of key scenes provided discrete information demonstrating that the doll was guiding the journey. For instance, Tracy’s writing represented many of the arguments shared by students, although she was cautionary in that she couched it in the “doll is mostly in control.” She wrote:

I believe The Queen is mostly in control of the quest that the kids are going on to bury The Queen/Eleanor. Here are the events and my reasoning:

1. One night Poppy’s sister scared her because Poppy’s sister woke up in the middle of the night, and said, “If she gets out of the case, she’ll come for us.” I believe that the Queen had something to do with what Poppy’s sister said. Since Poppy’s sister wouldn’t have dreamed about the Queen (aka the doll).
2. Poppy said, “The grave is under a willow tree. Eleanor will tell the rest.” Well Poppy said that Eleanor will tell the rest, so The Queen might have led the way to her grave when they were on the quest.
3. Also, Tinshoe Jones said, “You are all jumpy, you know that? Real paranoid. Well I’m not gonna talk to the blonde, so you better forget that idea. I don’t like the way she’s staring at me.” Tinshoe Jones said blonde and neither Poppy nor Alice had blonde hair. Only The Queen. If Tinshoe Jones said that, then maybe he saw Eleanor’s ghost. Plus I don’t think it was the reason that he was drunk.
4. Zach dreamed that he was Eleanor and the dream showed him how Eleanor died. Also, Poppy’s dream was connected to Zach’s. Here is an example of one of Zach’s dreams, “He dreamed about a big building near a river billowing smoke for its towers. And then his

dream vision swopped forward, he saw a yellow-haired girl watching as her father spun beautiful things from bone china.” That led me to think that The Queen was in charge of showing them how they died. Also, that The Queen was always near Poppy and Zach when they dreamed about The Queen.

5. I think The Queen led Zach, Alice, and Poppy to the library to find that plaque that showed how other people thought that Eleanor/The Queen died, and why her dad died. Also, that they were looking for The Queen when Zach found the plaque. If The Queen went somewhere then it was her idea to go somewhere in the middle of the night, near that plaque that had her history of events from then to now so they would know.

Her details were grounded in specific information from the text related to key scenes. She did not just provide an opinion without text evidence. To produce this response, Tracy had to reread her book, find key events, and then use text evidence to support her opinions.

Jared provided his argument through key places noted in the book. He wrote:

What I think: I think that the queen led the quest and here are my reasons why.

1. The House: In the house they met the queen, a bone china doll named Eleanor. When the doll was by the bed, she said, “I need to get to my grave to rest” and Zach fell. I think the doll made him fall and let him know she was real.
2. The Bus: Where they met Tinshoe Jones. Tinshoe said, “I won’t bother the blond.” He saw her.
3. By the River: This is where the doll came and trashed the campsite and ended up being near Poppy. She wanted to wake them up. She moved and was in their dreams.
4. In the Boat: When they were in the boat well Alice threw the doll in the water and then Zach went in and swam to get the doll from sinking. She (the doll) helped him find her so the quest could continue.
5. The Graveyard: So when they were in the graveyard, Zach fell in front of the grave. The doll made him do that. If the doll didn’t do that, they would have missed it.

So the doll was in charge and you can see that in these scenes.

Jana varied the idea of using key scenes by providing a quote for each scene that taken together built her case for the queen being in charge. Her response, as were most, was multimodal in that she included a visual representation to connect with the scene and provided arrows to guide a reader's journey (see Figure 1).

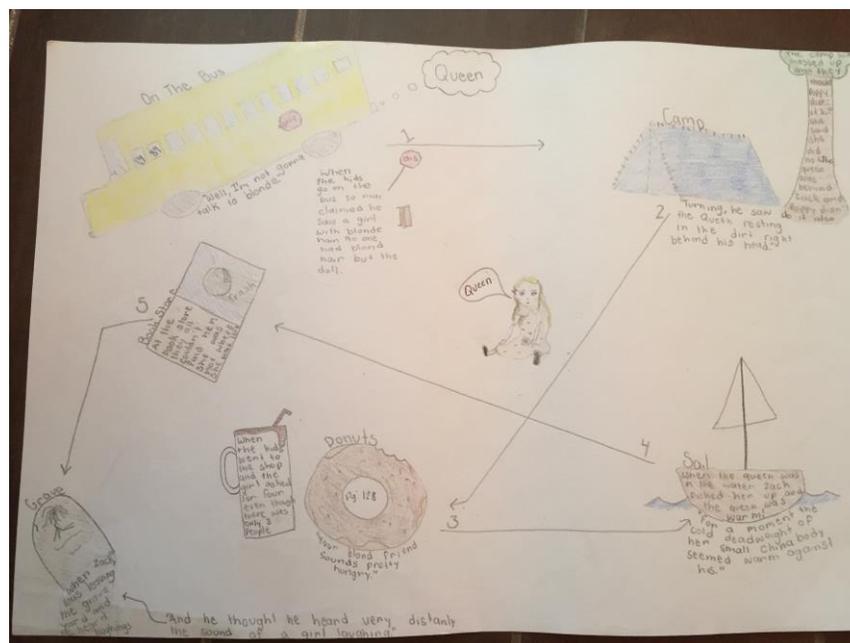


Figure 1. A multimodal poster to support the queen being in charge.

Beginning with her first scene, she wrote, “When the kids go on the bus and a man claimed he saw a girl with blonde hair. No one had blonde hair but the doll. “Well, I’m not gonna talk to the blonde.” Jana in her data clips relied on text quotes to build her argument.

Transitioning from Response to Persuasive Essay

As students created their responses about the doll leading the quest, they often constructed their responses in a linear fashion. They presented the first piece of evidence, the second, and so on until their argument was complete. When considering the sum total of their responses, each piece of evidence built to a persuasive essay. All that would be necessary to create the essay would be to reconfigure their information from the poster to a paper or electronic paragraph format and provide connections from idea to idea. Their responses provided the foundation for persuasive essay writing. For example, Lindsey wrote:

1. On page 84, Tinsloe Jones said, he's "not going to talk to the blonde." Even though he is a little crazy, he still said that the queen was a real person so Tinsloe Jones can see her as a real person.
2. On page 224, the doll was in the trash bin in the girls' bathroom. How did she get there if Poppy was touching her during the night? Even if Poppy brought the doll to the bathroom and dropped her in the bin wouldn't she go crazy trying to find her? So it seems like the doll got up by itself.
3. On page 224, it said that Zack looked in the mirror and he didn't see his face, he saw the doll's face where his should have been. Some people might say he hallucinated from lack of food or water. But he had just eaten and had some soda. So it had to be the doll maybe trying to say that he found her story.
4. On page 176, the lady at the diner could clearly tell there were three children but then why did she ask if there were four? I think she saw the doll as a real person. And then on page 199, the teenage server can see the doll too.

Lindsey's responses showed how she was constructing her argument, detail by detail. She used text evidence plus her explanation to build her argument. She also demonstrated her sense of audience as she shared a detail and then argued for why her interpretation was accurate with additional information from the book. All that was missing from her response was an introduction and conclusion to become an essay.

Sophia's response was similar to Lindsey's as she carefully built her argument from scene to scene. She organized her response through details of each stop in the journey. For each piece of evidence she shared a quote to support her interpretation and she provided a circular line to help the reader along her path of reasoning (see Figure 2).

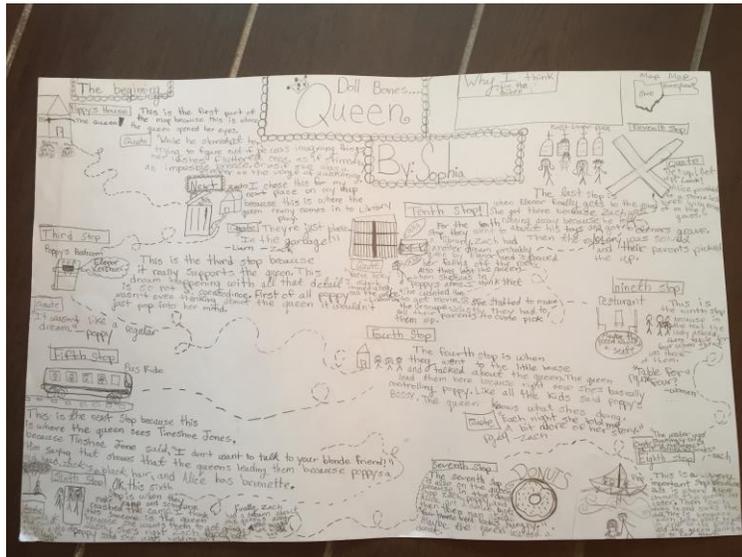


Figure 2. A multimodal response that leads to a persuasive essay.

Sophia also created a multimodal response to help the reader/viewer enhance his or her understanding of her argument by having a visual connection to each scene.

Melati's response showed how she included small pieces of evidence and then created an essay for her response. Melati's response clearly indicated how students shift from creating an argument as a response to reading to creating a persuasive essay (see Figure 3).

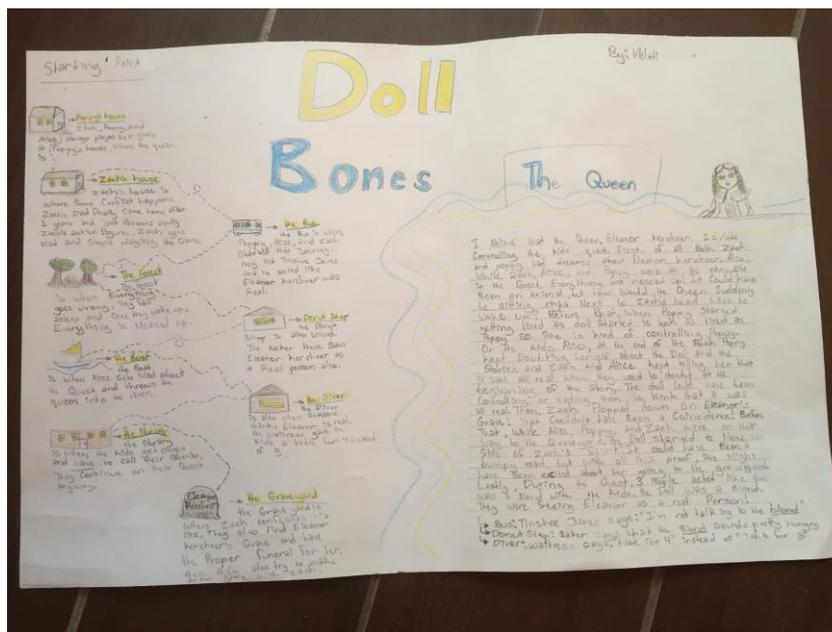


Figure 3. A full persuasive essay response.

Her essay began with an “I believe” statement and then she moved to sharing her evidence. In her writing, she used transition words like first, next, and also so a reader could better understand her argument and how each piece of evidence substantiated her case. She ended her essay with “Lastly, during the quest, 3 people acted like there was a blond with the kids. The doll was a blond. They were seeing Eleanor as a real Person!” In her response, she added an introduction, an ending, and detailed pieces of evidence to support her argument. She also included transitions from idea to idea resulting in a complete essay.

Finally, we shared Joey’s response as it targeted an audience, offered visual enhancement, and provided an argument for his interpretation. Joey understood that a persuasive argument had to be powerful to convince an audience (see Figure 4).

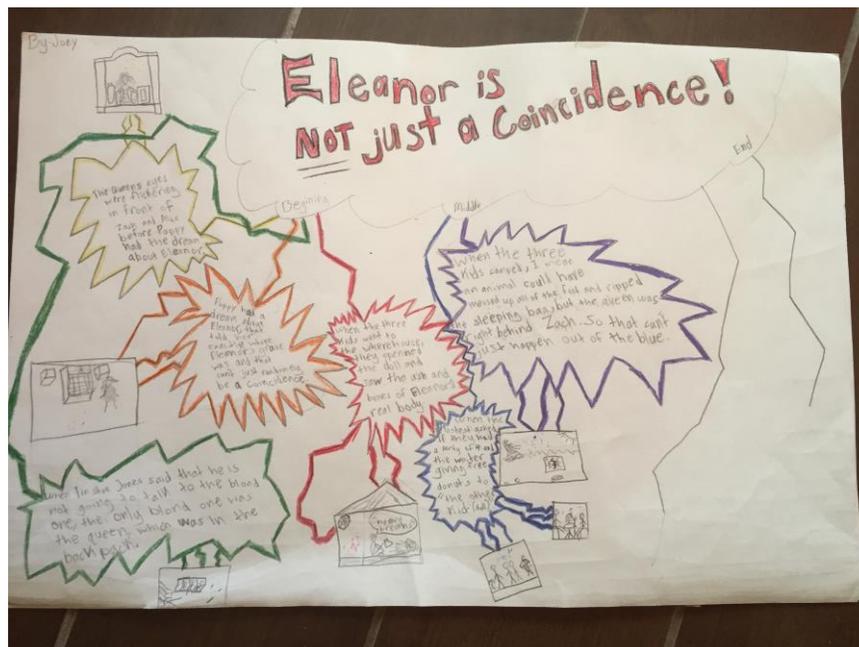


Figure 4. A response to engage an audience.

He shared his points of information and created a visual representation to give power to his argument. He used red font and bold letters for his title with an exclamation point. His letters had power in that they were framed, red, and at the top of his argument. For each piece of evidence, he placed them into a shape with points showing the urgency of his argument. He also organized his argument with a beginning, middle, and end (not complete) to convince others of his beliefs.

Each of the responses showcased how responding to a book served as a scaffold to more formal persuasive writing. For some students, discrete pieces of information were shared to linearly create their argument. Others moved the discrete pieces of information to an essay format, with a few adding an introduction and conclusion. Finally, students understood the power of illustration and used color, points, and line to enhance their thinking.

Discussion

McCann (2014) and Read, Landon-Hays, and Martin-Rivas (2014) discussed how persuasive writing allows for an individual to build an argument for a position about a topic. Further, Gillespie, Olinghouse, and Graham (2013) and Wollman-Bonilla (2004) described how students were not familiar with this genre. And Philippakos and MacArthur (2016) shared how teachers typically

engaged students with topics that were not very satisfying to argue about. These fifth grade students, through responding to a book, built persuasive cases where they used text information as support for their argument. As seen in their examples, they created their cases through multiple reasons with quotes and interpretations of the quotes to strengthen their arguments. In order to build these arguments, they had to read their books closely and recursively to find text evidence to support their ideas. They also included visual representations to strengthen their arguments.

Felton and Herko (2004) and Radcliffe (2012) shared the difficulty of taking students' ideas and crafting a persuasive essay. These students did not exhibit this difficulty as they used text evidence to support their positions. They were not expected to create an essay; rather, they were expected to support their opinion through using evidence from critical scenes within the book. Each of these scenes lent themselves to being a portion of a persuasive essay. Responding to a book, persuasively, allowed students to construct a persuasive argument using writing and drawing without the more formal expectation of an essay. Thus, using evidence from the book to build an argument served as a transition to more formal, essay writing. Teachers could use response as a way to carefully build the skills necessary for students to create persuasive essays.

Although this strategy was used with elementary students, it lends itself to middle and high school students. These students and their teachers often struggled with the persuasive genre of writing. Rather, than expecting an essay in initial instruction, the use of book response with text support offered a transition or scaffold to more formal, essay writing.

Importantly, students talked during reading and as they crafted their posters. Students listened to other students' talking and these observations provided modeling for their own thinking. Moore and MacArthur (2012) suggested that this type of collaboration was more effective than practice writing when students were developing understanding of a new genre. Similarly, Hattie (2012) argued that teachers need to engage students in activities that require intellectual demand and challenge. This activity was centered in student talk, not teacher talk where students were passive participants. And this activity resulted in increased student engagement and learning. Clearly, building a persuasive case by listening in to other students' thinking supported students as they took on the challenge to persuade others.

We found that students enjoyed building their arguments. They carefully found what they thought were the most convincing scenes to support their

arguments. They provided text support to give credibility to their arguments. Finally, they created multimodal responses to extend their text-based arguments, as they understood the importance of visually supporting their argument.

We believed the multimodal qualities of students' posters were particularly interesting. It was clear that the multimodality of the students' responses enhanced their arguments. For instance, they used line and color to bolster their claims (see Figures). They understood that to influence someone and be convincing, a visual and textual argument was more powerful than text alone. Though most persuasive essays were primarily based in text, our research suggested that teachers should encourage students to include visual evidence as a textual complement in order to create a more cogent argument. These multimodal persuasive essays demonstrated the power of such complementarity to effectively persuade and built on students' visual strengths.

Removing the challenge of writing a formal persuasive essay allowed students to engage in talk as they defined the important points in their arguments. This talking throughout the creative process supported students as they utilized their peers as experts and audience. When students were expected to draft formal persuasive essays, teachers should be encouraged to facilitate student support throughout the process. Talk sharpened student arguments and led them to sophisticated grounding of their arguments. Throughout the process, audience awareness was integrated and resulted in convincing arguments.

Becky, the teacher, learned through this experience how beneficial it was to follow the lead of students. When she listened in to their arguments with one another as they read, she offered space in her curriculum for them to pursue a more formal way to persuade others. She didn't leave them with just a conversation; rather, she provided an opportunity to more systematically build an argument. While she wasn't sure that using scenes would be an appropriate scaffold, the students' posters suggested they carefully used the scenes with text evidence to build their cases. The scenes sequentially scaffolded their larger argument. Finally, she discovered that the combination of writing and drawing helped them use the strengths of each modality to cogently build an argument.

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