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Discovering Argument: Linking Literacy, Citizenship Education, and Persuasive Advocacy

This paper explores persuasive writing and what more might be done to help equip young people with the written literacy tools to be effective participants in civic activism. Firstly, we argue from an Australian (and Tasmanian) context that there may be merit in teachers and students re-visiting some of the advice from classical rhetoric around the discovery of arguments. Secondly, we analyse challenges that 14 year old students face in responding to Australia's national literacy tests which include a persuasive writing task – and exemplify this section with evidence drawn from a data source of outstanding student responses. We conclude by critically reviewing and augmenting the literacy strategies suggested in a representative citizenship education teaching text, and suggest a tentative stepped model for supporting high quality persuasive writing in the context of active citizenship and democratic engagement.

Keywords:

civics and citizenship education; literacy; persuasive writing; classical rhetoric; civic activism

1 Introduction

Possessing the capacity to write persuasively fosters active participation and access to power in democracies. As Crowhurst (1990) explained, “the literate, educated person is expected to be able to articulate a position on important matters so as to persuade colleagues, fellow citizens, governments, and bureaucrats” (p. 349). Advocacy, campaigning, and taking informed action are at the heart of effective citizenship education. Moreover, it is important for active citizens to be able to engage critically with ideas and proposals for which a range of public persuasive stakeholders and organizations are hoping to garner support. However, the multiple literacy challenges faced by young people in developing their agency as active citizens should not be underestimated.

This article's focus is upon written advocacy—strategies and forms of writing practised by young people to increase their capacity for participation in a democratic society. Experiential, active citizenship will usually require some kind of marshalling of evidence and making a case for change in writing. Film-making, oral presentations to community leaders, and online, web-based advocacy can also represent highly effective forms

of campaigning for young people - but these will also usually require the formulation of a written script of some kind. The purpose of the article is fourfold: firstly, to re-capitulate the kinds of possible argument structures from classical rhetoric which teachers might usefully introduce to students; secondly, to analyse the features of high quality persuasive writing undertaken by high attaining Tasmanian students in NAPLAN testing contexts and how conclusions arising from this work might move teachers and students away from arid, technician interpretations of writing to persuade; thirdly, to identify how teachers currently attempt to structure, scaffold, and build students' persuasive writing, reviewing a representative student textbook writing frame; and finally, we propose a provisional alternative model and repertoire of teaching strategies which draws upon classical rhetorical wisdom.

Concerns around literacy are high in the Australian island state of Tasmania, where the authors of this article are based. A recent report by the Australian Bureau of Statistics has indicated that half of all Tasmanian citizens aged 15 to 74 are functionally illiterate (ABS, 2013). They struggle to read or draw low level inferences from a newspaper. Of all Australian states and territories, Tasmania has the highest rate of students who leave school in Year Ten (aged 16). 47 per cent of 15 year old Tasmanians failed to achieve the Australian national minimum standard of English, compared to 36 per cent nationally in the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN] tests (Australian Curriculum, Assessment & Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2012a). Low levels of attainment feed through into the highest levels of youth unemployment in Australia: 20.5 per cent of 15-24 year olds in the north west of Tasmania were classified as unemployed in March 2014 (Brotherhood of St. Laurence, 2014). Low levels of literacy achievement correlate with economic, civic, and democratic deficits: “Tasmania ranks at the bottom among Australian states on virtually every dimension of economic, social, and

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cultural performance” (West, 2013, p. 50), including lowest incomes, highest rate of chronic disease, poorest longevity, highest rates of smoking and greatest obesity. Schools and teachers cannot provide magic bullet solutions to these entrenched socio-economic realities, but education constitutes a central component of any enhancement of young people’s future societal choices.

A range of thoughtful academic authorities have recently drawn attention to the interconnections between literacy and civic activism, including in rural and regional areas of the world such as Tasmania (See Green & Corbett, 2013; Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2011). Place and location make a difference to how relationships are likely to be forged between citizenship education and literacy; meaningful and authentic active citizenship projects aim to engage young people in real problems and issues in their localities before making broader connections to national and global contexts (Cormack, 2013). Young people’s social justice goals can be married to literacy ambitions and critical literacy pedagogies (Kerkham & Comber, 2013). Tasmania is representative of rural and regional areas throughout the developed world in being ripe for pedagogical innovation that links transformational thinking about advocacy with high quality literacy practices. Learning to write persuasively is a ‘democracy sustaining approach to education’ just as much as learning to talk effectively about the issues of the day is a cornerstone of a healthy democracy (Hess, 2009, p. 5). We argue here - drawing upon traditions of classical rhetoric - that a focus upon the discovery of ideas, and arrangement and style structures might help teachers to equip young people with the written literacy tools to articulate ideas more powerfully and thereby support effective civic activism.

Literacy imperatives are also citizenship imperatives (Freire & Macedo, 1987). The capacity to think critically and act in relation to social and political concerns underpins effective citizenship education¹. Evidence suggests that young Australians have a clear sense of justice or fairness: for example, 73 per cent of the 6,400 Year Ten students from 312 schools surveyed as part of the Civics and Citizenship National Assessment Program in 2010 considered it ‘very important’ or ‘quite important’ to take part in activities promoting human rights, while 78 per cent of the same cohort considered it ‘very important’ or ‘quite important’ to participate in activities to benefit the local community (ACARA, 2011b, p. 65). However, a less explored aspect of this field is the extent to which literacy practices in school settings currently support effective education for citizenship (although Sally Humphrey has been a notable contributor in this area (Humphrey, 2008 & 2013).

Disciplinary boundary crossing can be mutually beneficial in enabling rich exploration of both language and ideas. However, research evidence suggests teachers find such boundary crossing relatively challenging. In England, in the early years of the implementation of a new Citizenship curriculum, inspection evidence accumulated that cross-curricular approaches to

citizenship were often lacking in terms of both definition and rigour. The Office for Standards in Education [OFSTED] (2006) found that a permeation or infusion model was generally unsuccessful in terms of promoting high quality citizenship learning: “While it should be acknowledged that citizenship can be taught through other subjects and can be of benefit to them, cross-curricular work in most cases results in an uneasy and often unsuccessful compromise” (p. 23). Nevertheless, the animating idea prompting the authors’ collaboration was to explore how Civics and Citizenship teachers and English teachers might build professional bridges and engage in some cross-fertilization of thinking about how young people construct persuasive texts. We argue here that there is scope for deeper and more theoretically informed literacy practices in civics and citizenship education teaching contexts, and that there is also value in English teachers at all levels seeking out the kinds of authentic writing contexts which can arise naturally from citizenship-rich classrooms.

2 The writing challenge

There is no shortage of advice coming from authoritative sources on how to raise standards of achievement in students’ writing (e.g. Freebody, 2007; Graham, MacArthur & Fitzgerald, 2013; Beard et. al., 2009). ACARA has also disseminated relevant material on this topic to complement the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, which includes a new English syllabus and a cross-curricular focus on literacy (‘General Capability – Literacy’). Specialist organizations such as the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association (ALEA) and the Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA) also provide invaluable guidance (e.g. Derewianka, 2012; Holliday, 2010). Knowledge about writing – and the capacity to do so effectively - is only complete with understandings of the complex actions in which writers engage as they create texts.

Writing is highly challenging for many young people. They have to:

- Discover what they want to say and select the right material to keep answers relevant to the topic - with the added challenge in citizenship education contexts that the political context of contemporary issues may well represent unfamiliar territory;
- Research a topic, synthesising and summa-rising a range of information in ways that are meaningful—with citizenship education contexts throwing in the complication that the subject matter may be contested, controversial or polarizing (McAvoy & Hess, 2013);
- Organize their ideas into a structure that allows for a logical argument to be developed
- this can pose difficulties when they are unfamiliar with or unengaged by dry institutional or structural ‘Civics’ subject content;



- Distinguish between general points and the particular points that relate to the contemporary issue under investigation: They need to balance 'big points'—often the first sentence of a paragraph—with 'particular' material (e.g. details and examples that support the 'big points');
- Write using appropriate types of sentences, syntax and spelling;
- Know the right words to link ideas together (sentence starters and connectives) and develop an increasingly sophisticated 'language of discourse' including, for example, generalised participants, complex noun groups and nominalisation, complex sentence structures, and the deployment of a variety of rhetorical devices (Counsell, 1997; Rowe & Edwards, 2007).

Successful advocacy also requires: knowledge, the discovery and arrangement of arguments, confidence, research, perseverance, and dialogue with individuals, institutions or organizations with the capacity to pull levers of change. Moreover, the 'grammar of persuasion' is complex, and it takes time for students to develop control of the language resources and stylistic devices used for arguing a case (Derewianka & Jones, 2012; O'Neill, 2012; Humphrey & Robinson, 2013). It should be noted that current theoretical underpinnings in the *Australian Curriculum: English* that are explicit about written grammar are drawn from understandings of functional grammar (e.g., Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Moreover, useful persuasive writing frameworks have been developed for teachers through the systematic functional linguistics (SFL) tradition (see Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Humphrey et al., 2010; Humphrey & Robinson, 2013). While this tradition presents many relevant descriptions of language resources that contribute to the persuasiveness of any text, this article is conceived to complement and enhance understandings about persuasive writing using ideas and structural frames derived from classical rhetoric. Young writers must have command of a wide repertoire of possible argumentation strategies, and be aware of the contexts in which different strategies can most appropriately be applied.

3 The classical rhetorical tradition

The founding father of classical rhetoric—Aristotle—defined it as “the technique of discovering the persuasive aspects of any given subject-matter” (Lawson-Tancred, 2004, p. 65). Orators followed a set of principles to persuade audiences about the truth of an issue, or to act in a certain way. Classical rhetoric was further developed in Ancient Rome, where scholars such as Cicero and Quintilian refined a pedagogical approach grounded in Aristotelian theory (Nelson & Kinneavy, 2003). This approach separated Aristotle’s rhetoric into five parts for pedagogical purposes, known as the five canons.

The principles that make up the five canons form a cognitive model of argument that can be followed by

speakers and writers to construct and deliver arguments on any topic. In the traditional Latin, the five canons are *Inventio*, *Dispositio*, *Elocutio*, *Memoria*, and *Pronuntiatio*, which in English translate as *Invention/Discovery*, *Arrangement*, *Style*, *Memory*, and *Delivery* (Corbett & Connors, 1999). A brief description of each canon was provided by Cicero (Rackham, 1942), who stated a public speaker:

“...must first hit upon what to say (*Invention*); then manage and marshal his discoveries, not merely in orderly fashion, but with a discriminating eye for the exact weight as it were of each argument (*Arrangement*); next go on to array them in the adornments of style (*Style*); after that keep them guarded in his memory (*Memory*); and in the end deliver them with effect and charm (*Delivery*)” (p. 142).

This still represents accessible advice to students in contemporary classrooms. For persuasive writing, only the first three canons are relevant, as the principles of *Memory* and *Delivery* do not come into play for written discourse. According to this model, the first step in constructing a persuasive text is to invent or discover arguments. Before compelling arguments can be marshalled, speakers and writers must first have something to write about.

To assist speakers and writers to discover matter for their persuasive texts, theorists of classical rhetoric devised a number of lines of argument known as topics, which ‘suggested material from which proofs could be made’ (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 19). Aristotle outlined common topics: a stock of general arguments that could be used on any occasion, and special topics: specific arguments appropriate to three persuasive genres: deliberative discourse, forensic discourse and epideictic discourse. Deliberative discourse was used to persuade others to do something or to accept a point of view, forensic discourse was used to determine the legality of an action, and epideictic discourse was used to praise individuals or groups (Kennedy, 1999).

Deliberative discourse—also referred to as hortative discourse—is “occasioned by, and created in response to, a community’s need to make a decision” (Markel, 2009, p. 5). Thus civics and citizenship education generally tends to privilege this form of writing. At the heart of the discovery of argument is the notion of ‘the common good’ and identification of worthy or advantageous ways forward. To persuade others to take some future action, a persuasive writer “aims at establishing the expediency or the harmfulness of a proposed course of action; if he urges its acceptance, he does so on the ground that it will do good; if he urges its rejection, he does so on the ground that it will do harm” (Kennedy 2007, p. 6).

Aristotle also identified three artistic proofs, commonly referred to as the three appeals. Effective persuasive speakers and writers boost their own credibility by appealing to *ethos*; they trigger emotional responses in



their audiences by appealing to pathos; and they highlight the logic in their arguments by appealing to logos. The three appeals are now explored in more depth, beginning with appeals to ethos.

Aristotle (Lawson-Tancred, 2004) described appealing to ethos as “proof from character produced whenever the speech is given in such a way as to render the speaker worthy of credence” (p. 74). Nelson and Kinneavy (2003) stated that “directly or indirectly, the establishment of credibility is paramount; if the writer is not believed, the rest of the speech is wasted on the audience” (p. 792). This is one reason why teachers advise students to integrate examples, details, and the voices of experts into their texts, as their credibility and trustworthiness enhances the students’ arguments. Appeals to ethos serve to demonstrate how responsible, faithful, ethical or values-based an author is. By developing arguments that emphasise the value of relationships, morality, truth, or duty of care towards others, writers highlight their good character, and thus readers are more inclined to side with them.

Much research has focused on the important role emotions play in persuasion (Dillard, 1998). For example, the work of Brader (2006) investigated the use of appeals in political advertisements, finding they were deeply saturated with emotional appeals, and that the persuasive effectiveness of campaign advertising generally depended on whether appeals were made to threaten or enthrall audiences. Some forms of rhetoric practiced today are regarded with suspicion and disdain, including propaganda, demagoguery, brainwashing and doublespeak (Corbett & Connors, 1999). While appeals to pathos are a powerful tool of persuasion, young writers who focus too much attention on appealing to pathos, risk their credibility, and can thus undermine any appeals to ethos.

Finally, Aristotle (Lawson-Tancred, 2004) described appeals to logos as “proofs achieved by the speech when we demonstrate either a real or an apparent persuasive aspect of each particular matter” (p. 75). In contemporary times, the NAPLAN Persuasive Writing Marking Guide (ACARA, 2013) highlighted a number of language choices that signify appeals to logos (See Fig. 1), however the classical model was more concerned with making use of either inductive reasoning – “moving from particulars to generalization”, or deductive reasoning – “beginning with principles that the writer and readers share, and drawing from them inferences that apply to the issue at hand” (Nelson & Kinneavy, 2003, p. 792).

In any given act of persuasion, an author can employ the use of one appeal exclusively, or some combination of two or three appeals. The choice is “partly determined by the nature of the thesis being argued, partly by the circumstances, and partly (perhaps mainly) by the kind of audience being addressed” (Corbett and Connors, 1999, p. 32). All three appeals are associated with successful persuasion, with some speakers and writers making them “haphazardly, others by custom and out of habit”, and thanks to the classical model, “it is possible to study

the reason for success both of those who succeed by habituation and of those who do so by chance” (Aristotle, trans. Lawson-Tancred, 2004, p. 66).

Figure 1: Features of arguments that draw on the three appeals according to the NAPLAN persuasive writing marking guide (NAPLAN, 2011)

Ethos – appeal to values	Logos – appeal to reason	Pathos – appeal to emotion
Value of relationships	Dispassionate language	Emphatic statements
Appeal to truth	Objective author stance	Emotive language
Duty of care	Citing of a relevant authority	Direct appeal to the reader
Creation of a just society	Objective view of opposition	Appeal to spurious authority
Community responsibility	Qualified measured statements	Disparagement of opposition

To summarise the discovery of argument process, the form of persuasive discourse a speaker or writer chooses will indicate a set of special topics that they can base their arguments on. In turn, these topics suggest material from which proofs can be made, in order to persuade others to think or do something. According to Phillips (1991), the canons of classical rhetoric have “stood the test of time” and “represent a legitimate taxonomy of processes” (p. 70). Teachers can do a great deal to provide students with access to a range of persuasive genres and to provoke discussion around the power of a particular persuasive genre (e.g. a campaigning advertisement, an iconic political speech, a petition or letter) to convey a message. Immersing students in the processes of discovering and arranging arguments can also prompt greater familiarity with the kinds of rhetorical possibilities inherent in persuasive writing – “if one is going to write in a genre, it is very helpful to have read in that genre first” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2004).

4 Persuasive writing in literacy testing contexts

We have been fortunate to secure access to sixty of the highest performing Tasmanian students’ responses to the 2011 NAPLAN persuasive writing test. In the next section of the paper, we exemplify and analyse features of Year 9 students’ writing in relation to the prompt ‘Too much money is spent on toys and games’ and identify the sophistication of varying expressions of argument. The linkage to a pre-requisite of high quality civics and citizenship education becomes quickly apparent.

While other methods of writing instruction focus on how persuasive texts are structured in generic stages, the principles of Invention assist authors to construct arguments based on special topics that are associated with the three forms of persuasive discourse. With their ideas invented, authors can then express them via appeals to ethos, logos and/or pathos to suit a given audience. At any stage in the process, the author can



refer back to the principles of Invention should they become unsure of what or how to argue.

While these high performing students may not have been explicitly taught the principles of Invention, their use in the texts was evident. For instance, one student opened up her exposition with the following arguments:

“There is no doubt in my mind that far too much money is spent on toys and games. In a world where natural disasters are on the rise and more and more people are living in abject poverty, there is every reason to spend money on global issues, rather than luxuries. In a world where obesity is on the rise, encouraging hours of immobilization is not an option. And in a world that is slowly being taken over by smog and trash, we cannot afford the mass production of these objects”.

The language choices made by this student sustain a juxtaposition of global poverty and consumer spending, and articulate and exemplify themes of unhealthiness and unsustainability. Yet classical rhetoric allows us to probe more deeply into the language choices made to offer these arguments. In terms of persuasive discourse, this excerpt is largely deliberative in nature. Three of the four sentences focus on what people should or should not do in the future to combat global issues. The author drew mainly on the special topics of the worthy and the unworthy, painting a picture of what is wrong with the world, and what are—ethically speaking—the ‘right’ ways to respond to such problems. Regarding appeals, the majority were made to logos and ethos. The author consistently began sentences with descriptions of significant issues affecting people and the planet, and followed these up with suggested courses of action. Appeals to ethos could have been strengthened if the author drew on views of experts in these fields, for example, how they have argued that natural disasters are on the rise that more people are living in abject poverty, that obesity is on the rise, and that smog and trash is taking over the world. These issues were stated as unarguable truths without dialogic space for alternative realities. However, given the nature of NAPLAN testing—which does not allow students to access books or computers once the test is underway - it is unsurprising that such arguments are typically based on opinion rather than evidence. In more authentic civics and citizenship persuasive writing contexts, teachers can underline the benefits of drawing on the views of experts and using evidence from research to support truth claims.

Another high-performing Year 9 student also developed the theme of distorted spending priorities as their central argument:

“Technological game consoles are resource-intensive to produce and are highly expensive for anyone buying them, so why do we keep putting our money into useless things like this when we could be helping find

cures for diseases, stop the famine in Africa, and give the homeless a place to live? It is absolutely certain that we are wasting too much money on technological and digital games. Although they may be fun and entertaining, why not spend the money on something useful?”

This excerpt is also largely deliberative in nature, as the student juxtaposed contrasting ideas in order to persuade those who spend money on games to consider changing their behaviour. As in the first example, this second student drew on the special topics of deliberative discourse to present certain behaviours as worthy (finding cures for diseases, stopping famine, and giving homeless people somewhere to live), and others as unworthy (producing and buying technological game consoles). Yet unlike the first example, this student drew on notions of the advantageous to suggest that playing games is entertaining, and also of the disadvantageous to suggest that games are expensive to purchase. The student juxtaposed the special topics of deliberative discourse, arguing that while toys are fun and entertaining (advantageous), money should be spent on things that are more useful (worthy). Ranking special topics as more or less important is an effective way for students to show consideration of a range of perspectives, and can enhance the persuasiveness of their writing.

Regarding the three appeals, this student could have appealed to pathos as they wrote about diseases, famine and homelessness, however the arguments were kept formal and analytical, never featuring emotive verbs like ‘suffer’, ‘starve’ or ‘freeze’. Instead, the student relied on appealing to logos and ethos, highlighting why it is disadvantageous and therefore illogical to produce and buy technological games, and strongly promoted ethically sound actions that make the world a better place for those in need.

While appealing to the emotions of the audience can persuade others (Corbett & Connors, 1999), assessors valued this student’s choice to not use such appeals in this way. By contrast, another student pursued a comparable theme to equally powerful effect, yet with a thicker layering of appeals to pathos:

“While some children in the developed world are having fun with toys and games, millions live in poverty without even a teddy bear to hug at night...As you are reading this piece of writing four children have died due to malnutrition in a third world country. When you think about how many have died in the duration of this essay, then the toys you played with in your childhood don’t matter at all. The billions of dollars spent on toys each year to keep a small number of children amused for a couple of hours could really be put to a better use”.

At one level, this kind of writing can be admired and assessed for the sophistication of its sentence structure, vocabulary, cohesion and its accumulation of figurative



devices such as antithesis, parallelism and hyperbole, but what should not be discounted is its passionate realisation of principles of Invention. The first three sentences focused on comparing the lives of the many children living in poverty with those of the fewer children living in developed countries. The text drew on the special topics of epideictic discourse, in particular personal assets to highlight those who are more and less fortunate, but also, more implicitly, virtues and vices to portray those in developed countries as potentially unkind, selfish and even cruel. The author also made emotive appeals to pathos, describing the many children in less fortunate countries as “not even having a teddy bear to hug at night” (i.e. possessing a complete lack of comfort) and “dying of malnutrition” (i.e. possessing a complete lack of food). By consistently referring to the greater number of children living in less fortunate countries, this served to increase the guilt felt by those from more privileged backgrounds. While these sorts of emotive language choices may not be appropriate in certain academic writing contexts, they can have a strong impact in civics and citizenship contexts as they often leverage core tenets of values and beliefs for rhetorical purposes, and can therefore be highly persuasive.

High performing students drew on the principles of Invention in a variety of ways to address this task. In contrast to those who based arguments on the worthy or unworthy, another student focused on the deliberative topic of the advantageous, arguing that “the money we waste on toys and games could be used for our children’s educational benefit”. Aside from educational benefits, the student also argued that limiting children’s access to toys could be advantageous to their health and well-being. The pay off line concluded:

“Would you rather support your child’s future or their endless need for toys that they hardly use? (...) The next time you go to buy your child toys and games, think again. It will save you money, help your child’s future, and benefit their health”.

The targeting of a parental audience helped this student focus their message. In terms of appeals, they emphasised logos, providing multiple reasons why it was illogical to purchase toys and games from children when they cause numerous issues and hinder the development of important life skills.

Another discursive response managed to turn the question into a meditation on the human condition and was prepared to mount a modest case in favour of toys and games:

“Humans only way of survival and fulfilment in life is to achieve a good balance of work, play, and rest (...) An appropriate amount of pleasure things should be

provided for child and adult alike. When considering what to buy, one should bear in mind that toys and games should be constructed out of sustainable and hardy materials such as wood or metal so they can last, and be effective over a lengthy period of time. In this way we can limit the money we spend on toys and games and direct it to something more important and worthwhile”.

In this deliberative text, the student based arguments in favour of buying particular, sustainably constructed toys and games on the special topic of the advantageous (as they provide pleasure for children and adults), while simultaneously basing arguments against the purchase of too many toys on the topic of the unworthy (as such actions are not important or worthwhile). As with a number of other high scoring examples, this text predominantly featured appeals to logos and ethos, with logical reasons provided for both sides of the topic, and a strong focus on ethics, with the suggested course of action arguably leading to the sustained health of people and the planet.

The high quality writing shared here has a powerful values base. It draws upon an internalised and synthesised sense of understanding about global issues, environmental sustainability, and governmental and consumer spending priorities. There is some higher order moral reasoning (Rowe, 2005). The students have moved from simple statements or opinions and consequential reasoning towards emergent ideological thinking (Connell, 1971). Analysis of high grade essays reveals that achievement is measured in terms of students demonstrating the capacity to move between concrete cases and abstract ideas and communicate meanings drawn from broad knowledge contexts. Students are “able to leap up further” from the concrete base established by the literacy test question setters “to reach more abstract principles” (Maton, 2009, p. 54). The frame of vision shifts from individual needs and wants to consideration of the collective common good. Students are able to think beyond the personal and concrete to the socio-political, public and global realms. The students have also moved from affective, common-sense empathy to cognitive empathy and explicit argumentation. This kind of writing does not come out of nowhere. Students need multiple opportunities in and beyond humanities and social sciences classrooms to rehearse and debate their responses to a wide range of contemporary social and political issues. As McCutchen (1986) demonstrated, children’s knowledge of the topic at hand greatly impacts the quality of their writing. The high performing texts also prompt the question, ‘How can teachers help more of their students to argue with this degree of written sophistication?’



5 From theory to practice: scaffolding written persuasive advocacy

Schools which are undertaking effective, high quality citizenship education enable learning through action—taking citizenship beyond the classroom to achieve tangible changes in the local community or wider national and global contexts (Audsley et al. 2013). The recently drafted Australian Curriculum for Civics and Citizenship has framed a curriculum which aims to support students to:

- “participate in civil society and community life with a focus on social and global issues” and
- “engage in activities to improve society, guided by civic values and attitudes” (ACARA, 2012, p. 10)

Having learned about, engaged with, and researched an issue, students are then encouraged to do something about it. Examples can include a letter to a politician or local leader, communication with the media, the creation of a display, a presentation using Information and Communication Technology, email petitions or other internet/social media engagement, a role-play, or an assembly designed for peers or younger pupils. All of these actions represent conscious acts of advocacy directed at an internal or external audience which aim to engage hearts and minds. And yet, in entering the shared territory between citizenship education and literacy, humanities and social sciences teachers are largely without a road-map. The rich understandings developed by literacy and language specialists around how young people can build their argumentation, communication and writing skills have barely dented classroom practices beyond the discipline context of English.

To support the analysis of the cross-fertilization of literacy principles into authentic civics and citizenship contexts, we share the following model of persuasive letter writing – drawn from a recent representative textbook published in England. Given the layers of complexity to persuasive writing already highlighted, it should be acknowledged that offering text-book guidance in this area is challenging. Connor (1990) noted “the inherent difficulty of operationalising and quantifying the new concepts of persuasion developed by linguists, rhetoricians, and philosophers” (p. 69). We identify the positive and helpful features of this stepped process before going on to suggest some revisions drawn from the principles of classical rhetoric and research in the areas of argumentation and communication.

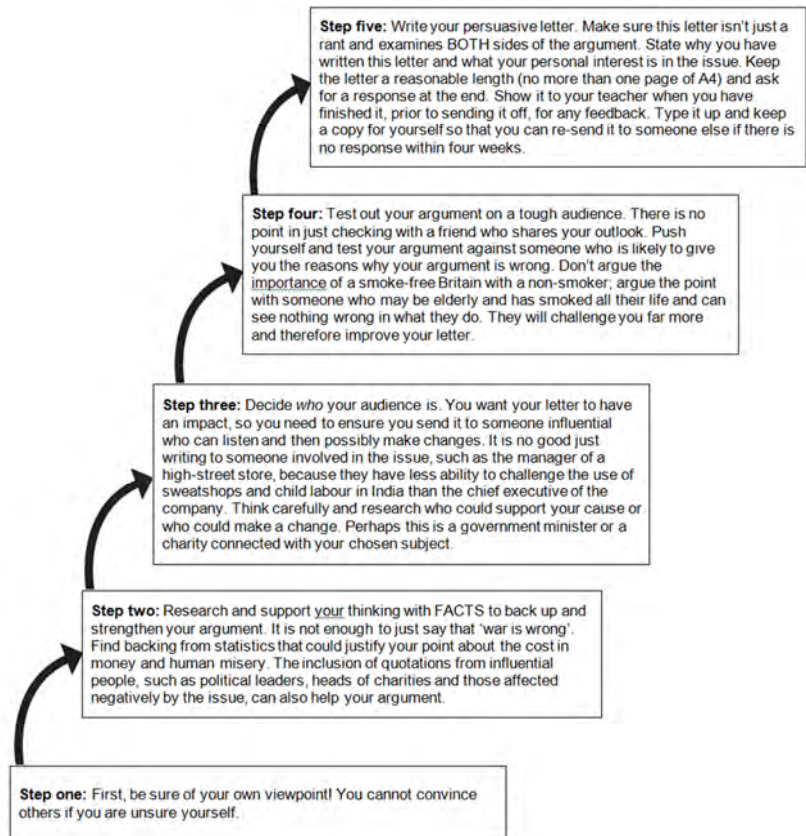


Figure 2: Textbook example of student guidance on writing a persuasive letter in the context of active citizenship (source: Ibegbuna, R. & Pottinger, L. (2009) *Citizenship through Informed and Responsible Action*. Folens: Haddenham, UK p. 57)

There is plenty to admire in the structure of this guidance to students. It represents a relatively developed thinking and writing frame in the context of scaffolding persuasive argument. Step 1 foregrounds and underlines the importance of the discovery of argument, however stops short of recommending how students can achieve this. Having a clear argument framework or super-structure is a fundamental component of successful persuasion. At Step 2 there is strong support for the notion of appealing to ethos and logos to enhance the credibility and reliability of arguments, with students encouraged to justify claims through the deployment of facts, statistics, and/or examples. At Step 3 there is nuanced advice in relation to tailoring argument to a specific audience or individual. Skilled arguers understand that the goal is not simply to advance an argument, but to advance that argument with the cooperation of one’s audience or reader. At Step 4 students are encouraged to actively consider and be prepared to refute the views of others. Students are pushed in the direction of considering the views of different stakeholders and multiple perspectives. Accommodating the perspective of others has been singled out as a critical social-cognitive quality that children must develop as a pre-requisite to effective persuasive argument (Clark & Delia, 1977). It is also



fundamental to effective citizenship education. At Step 5 students are cautioned against producing a ‘rant’. And it is certainly true—as we have indicated earlier—that an over-reliance upon emotional appeals to pathos may undermine a writer’s credibility. Overall, the adolescent audience to whom this guidance is offered receives some sensible advice. Nevertheless, we would argue that the guidance is incomplete. Without some significant elaboration and the incorporation of principles from classical rhetoric into the context of active citizenship.

lbeqbuna & Pottinger’s model), the Issue Stage we propose facilitates the discovery/invention of arguments for and against the issue at stake before a position is taken.

Researching and finding evidence about how the people involved on either side would be impacted by a proposed action or policy is an inherent part of this process, with the emphasis firmly on understanding an issue more fully. By creating graphic organizers and reviewing their responses to the scaffolded questions, students are better able to take a position that is informed by research and real-life stories, that compares and contrasts strengths and weaknesses of different viewpoints, and provides a solid foundation for the construction of compelling arguments. In doing so, students practice self-reflexivity and recognise the values-base from which they establish their own viewpoints. In other words, they are able to not only answer what they think about an issue, but also reflect upon why they feel this way, and what their position is based on.

Before students decide which of their responses might be used as lines of argument in their persuasive text, they must consider the needs of the audience they are attempting to persuade. Step 2 of the revised model has thus been labelled the ‘Audience Stage’. At this point, the student has a ready store of responses to the initial scaffolding questions, yet now must critically assess who they are writing for, and strategically select arguments that are likely to win their favour (Ryder, Vander Lei & Roen, 1999). To achieve this, different scaffolding questions can be posed, with a focus on the target audience. Notice that this Audience Stage is

where the three appeals are considered by the student author. Certain audiences respond effectively to emotional appeals, while others require strong appeals to logic and credibility to be convinced of their positions. The first two stages of our revised model, which can be classified as pre-writing exercises, highlight the choices available to students in how they might attempt to persuade a given audience. These choices are ascertained by employing the principles of classical rhetoric within the scaffolding questions, scrutinising the general issue first, and the specific audience second. Following these pre-writing exercises, the author is well-positioned to start writing their persuasive text.

The advice presented by the textbook (Fig. 2) concludes at Step 5, with the writing of a persuasive text, yet we would argue that this process stops at precisely the point where significant difficulties can arise for many students—the arrangement and articulation of their arguments. Students certainly need to be able to

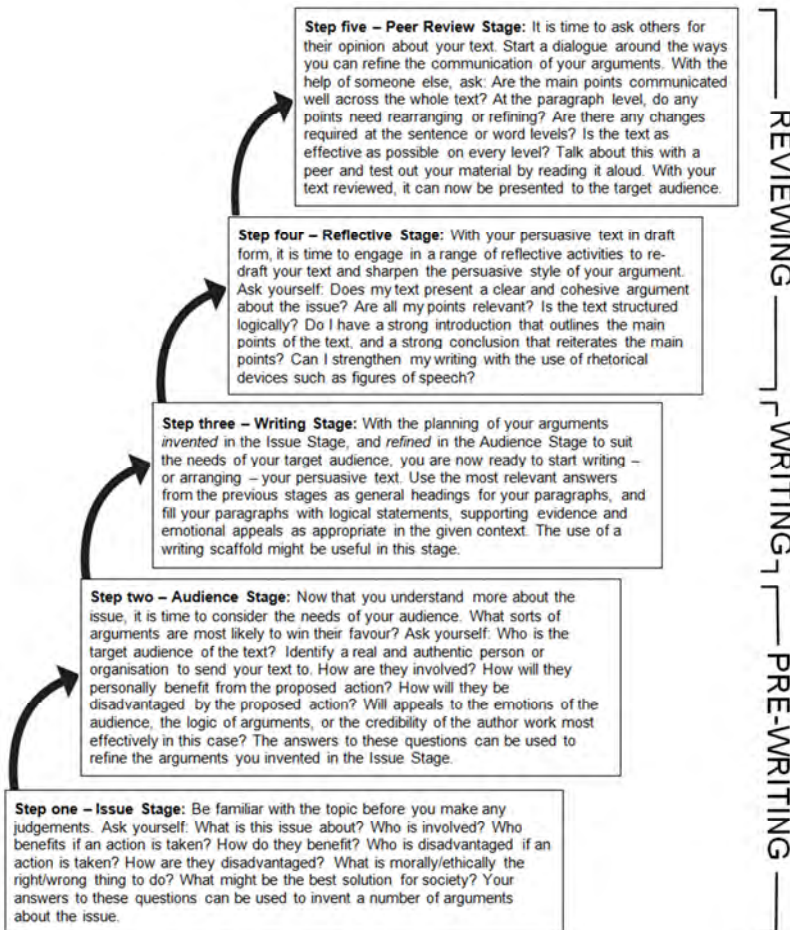


Figure 3 : Revised guidance on writing a persuasive text in the context of active citizenship

Rather than beginning the process by ensuring students are ‘sure of their own viewpoint’, we argue students must first be familiar with the issue at stake before any judgements are made. This initial step, which we refer to as the ‘Issue Stage’, requires an issue to be approached neutrally and considered from a variety of viewpoints. Students can unpack issues by posing scaffolding questions based on the special topics of deliberative discourse. In the majority of active citizenship, controversial and real life contexts, students write about particular actions that they think should or should not happen, and as such, deliberative questions often provide the appropriate means to understand the issue from multiple perspectives (Claire & Holden, 2007). Instead of first taking a position and then finding research to support that position (i.e. Steps 1 and 2 on



consider an issue from multiple perspectives, take a stance, consider the target audience for whom they are writing and be prepared to counter opposing viewpoints, but effective persuasive writing will also benefit from opportunities for students to:

- have seen and analysed comparative models and genres of persuasive writing and had opportunities to see what successful persuasive writing looks and feels like (Rose & Martin, 2012);
- talk about their work with teachers and peers (Wollman-Bonilla, 2004, p. 509-510);
- 'play' with persuasive texts so that they acquire and consolidate the concepts and meta-language to discuss the various argument structures and language features (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011);
- trial different modes of argument and different kinds of appeals;
- adjust the strength and focus of arguments and/or expand and contract arguments in the light of feedback and review by peers and teachers (Hillocks, 1995);
- consider specific strategies to most effectively introduce and conclude arguments;
- work more consciously on the vocabulary and language of advocacy and road-test the effectiveness of particular rhetorical devices and figures of speech deployed throughout their draft texts (Corbett & Connors, 1999);
- refine syntactic structure and vocabulary choices—such as the use of paired words, more sophisticated verbs, parallelism, or alliterative adjectives;
- consider their text at the level of sentence production and coherence. Emphasis, vividness, and 'flow' can all be considered at this 'micro' level of communication (the 3 x 3 and 4x 4 toolkits for persuasive writing are both highly useful at this writing stage (Humphrey et. al., 2010; Humphrey & Robinson, 2013)');
- edit and revise their work before submitting a final polished version with the aim of achieving a real and authentic outcome.

All of these additional layers of activity reflect upon and respect writing as a process. They enable higher order meta-cognition learning opportunities. Constructivist researchers argue that communication development is stronger as a socially shared experience with opportunities to discuss the interpretation and control of language with others. Given the opportunity to reflect on the content, structure and communication of their arguments with peers, young people begin to develop more advanced and generalisable argumentative strategies (Anderson et al., 2001). Effective end of task plenary review and evaluation processes can also promote meta-cognition and the transfer of argumentation strategies to new topics.

High quality persuasive writing should not be a one-shot deal. In a world beyond the artificiality of an examination hall, many steps are usually and ideally required to get from initial thoughts to the final iteration of articulated expression. This reflects authentic real world contexts. When writers actually start writing, they think of things that they did not have in mind before they began writing as they reflect upon their initial ideas. The act of writing is recursive in generating additional ideas, and revised thinking. We would therefore augment the Steps outlined in the student guide (Fig. 2) with the post-writing reflection, refinement and peer review encompassed in Steps 4 and 5 (Fig. 3).

6 Conclusion

Our observed experience is that much persuasive writing happening in Australian schools and classrooms - responding to NAPLAN test imperatives - is artificial and de-contextualized. It also tends to be reflective of a culture which rewards individual responses rather than collective endeavour. This is not reflective of real-world contexts where there are opportunities to bounce ideas off other people, share concerns, and build arguments in a team environment. Where the NAPLAN persuasive writing imperatives seem to have had constraining effects in schools, we propose a structured pedagogy linked to civic agendas and concerns which explores, connects, and stimulates political engagement and empathy. We contend that persuasive writing can be taught in a principled way, with the citizenship curriculum landscape providing authentic public audiences for persuasion, whilst also preparing students for high-stakes literacy tests.

The curriculum links between citizenship education and literacy can be strong. By Year 10, Australian students are expected within the English curriculum to create texts for 'informative or persuasive purposes that reflect upon challenging and complex issues' (ACARA, 2011b). It is also a stated curriculum aim that "In Civics and Citizenship students learn to understand and use language to explore, analyse, discuss and communicate information, concepts and ideas...to a variety of audiences" (ACARA, 2012b, p. 19). Allan Luke called recently for "substantive and intellectually demanding teaching and learning about how to 'read the world'; and rich, scaffolded classroom talk around matters of substance and weight" (Luke, 2012, p. 11). There can be a real power in engaging young people in deliberative democratic practices. Education for civic engagement needs to seek to develop within young people not only participation in democratic structures and debates but also the skills of 'democratic communication' (Englund, 2006, p. 503). This naturally includes the articulation of ideas in writing. It also incorporates helping young citizens wrestle with the characteristics of what constitutes a shared common good in ways in which Aristotle discussed in the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* (see Peterson, 2011, p. 34-38). Our article is conceived as an attempt to build bridges between



complementary curriculum areas and help students transfer knowledge and skills in relation to persuasive writing across different contexts of acquisition.

We take inspiration from our geographical location. Alongside the literacy challenges, Tasmania is also a place rich in fundamental and contested political debates, especially around environmental issues, where there are a range of opportunities for young people to exercise their democratic views (See Comber, Nixon & Reid, 2007). Topic areas include: the future of the forestry industry; the protection of native, old-growth trees; the possible heritage status of the Tarkine area in the north west of the State; the rights of four wheel drivers and surfers set against the protection of indigenous sites in the sand dunes on the State's west coast; and the pros and cons of the construction of wind farms on King Island. These are all issues on which young people can have an opinion and a voice. As Kerkham and Comber (2013) note, "Putting the environment at the centre of the literacy curriculum inevitably draws teachers into the politics of place and raises questions concerning what is worth preserving and what should be transformed" (p.197). Sometimes the learning point for students will be about the need to balance competing and conflicting demands, and understanding that in a democracy not everyone gets what they want.

Skilled argumentation and persuasion involves two related sets of cognitive skills—argument invention and communication, language and discourse strategies. Ultimately, the degree to which young people have succeeded in integrating and applying these complex skill sets is likely to determine the quality of their persuasive writing. This article has focused predominantly on the first dimension - the pre-writing generation of ideas. How to 'discover' something to say on a given subject is the crucial problem for most students. Since 'Inventio' is a systematized way of generating and critically reviewing ideas and alternative perspectives, we have argued that teachers and students may find immersion in this classical rhetorical approach helpful. In reviewing a scaffolded citizenship education writing frame we have also provided some more tentative suggestions in relation to a stepped approach towards the arrangement and style of argument, and hope to trial this framework in Tasmanian schools. A fuller exploration of engaging and effective pedagogies around 'Dispositio' and 'Elocutio' in the context of teaching civics and citizenship education is likely to be a fruitful area of future research.

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Endnote

¹ For good accounts of citizenship education in Australia see Print, 2008 and Tudball & Gordon, 2014

