

# Argumentative Writing and the Common Core in the DCPS: A Qualitative Analysis of Student and Teacher Perceptions

*This qualitative analysis of One World Education, a college-ready writing instruction program, reports on teacher and student reaction and satisfaction.*

**O**n December 15, 2015, two dozen students, their families, and a crowd of local teachers, educators, and dignitaries gathered at the Martin Luther King library in downtown Washington DC. The students had been selected out of 2,300 District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) and DC charter schools seniors to present their superlative arguments at the “College and Career Senior Challenge.” For these students, the Senior Challenge was the culmination of their participation in a writing program offered by the DC-based nonprofit, One World Education (OWEd).<sup>1</sup> Nervously, proudly, the students presented their arguments to an audience of community and corporate leaders, families, and educators. Fourteen students would walk away that night with scholarships. Seizing the moment as an ideal example of the confluence of administrator, teacher, student, and community interests, DCPS Chancellor Kaya Henderson extolled, “One World Education brings the curriculum to life for our students.” In this era of testing and accountability, curricular *life* can be hard to come by, especially in struggling urban school systems like the DCPS.

These students had begun their work months earlier, as part of the 6,000 students in grades 6, 8, 10, and 12 that the organization worked with this past school year in Washington DC. In some ways, the OWEd sequence is unremarkable, reflecting mainstream process-oriented pedagogy. And yet, OWEd is the first, and largest, formalization of argumentative writing in the DCPS. It took forward-looking administrators who saw that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) sanctioned

the teacher-driven OWEd program, finding value in college and career-ready writing skills too often ignored in the era of high-stakes testing.

Yet, as we know, widespread skepticism among educators about the CCSS standards resulted in what Dave Stuart Jr. called the “Common Core freakout.” As the *English Journal* editors remind us, designed by social and political elites, the CCSS “was neither sought nor developed by educators or those who care about students or the future of the common good” (Gorlewski and Gorlewski 12). With regards to writing specifically, as Arthur N. Applebee points out, the standards lack a developmental model for student writing, and as a result, emphasize the “formulaic and perfunctory” (29). Applebee calls instead for a sequenced approach to writing that engages students with worthy topics by building on background knowledge—a recommendation that this article will bear out.

But still, many remain optimistic, viewing the standards as a “tool” to rethink and connect various curricular silos. In teaching urban students specifically, Nicole Mirra et al. advocate for, and discuss their successes with, the potential to connect CCSS standards to instruction rooted in lived experience, honoring their students as “curious and critically thinking civic agents on their own terms” (50). In praising the Common Core State Standards’ emphasis on argument, “the unrivaled key to effective reading, writing, and speaking,” Mike Schmoker and Gerald Graff state emphatically: “let’s immediately begin, as the new standards urge us, to give students hundreds of opportunities, every year, to dismantle and defend arguments.” More so than

other major policy initiatives, like No Child Left Behind, it appears the CCSS allows for room to teach the argumentative writing skills that DC students will require to succeed in college and career.

In the spirit of this optimism, we were encouraged by the genuine and historically unique investment the DCPS in college-ready argumentative writing—which, defined by logical appeals and inquiry rooted in research, requires a substantial investment of effort and time—contracting One World Education as part of its CCSS-driven “Cornerstone” initiative. In addition to teaching the logical moves of argumentative writing, such as counterargument, in line with CCSS “Anchor Standards,” one salient feature of the program is that it intends to track closely with the needs and desires of students and teachers.

The One World Program is developed in close collaboration with teachers across the DCPS, who then serve as leaders and resources at their school for other teachers, in any class, that want to teach argumentative writing. And as for the students, the program engages them with an archive of successful arguments written by their peers. Rather than requiring students to read texts disconnected from their lives and concerns, the program allows them to respond to and write about self-chosen topics that are of interest to them. Although the One World Program has students engage with models selected from CCSS archives to identify and practice the moves of argumentation, the goal is to ultimately have students participate in their own discourse communities. Reflecting disciplinary best practices, this student-friendly approach is conversational and “bottom up,” as opposed to being dictated “top down” through inflexible models.

### The Assessment

During the 2015–16 academic year, approximately 6,000 students in grades 6–12 participated in the One World Program. Eager to support this work, one of us, Dr. Edward Comstock, a professor in the College Writing Program at American University, began to serve on the program’s Board of Directors. The other, Dr. Quentin Wodon, a lead economist at the World Bank—whose work assessing education programs in developing countries around the world made his interest in the DCPS a natural, if

unexpectedly local, endeavor—was also eager to learn more about this promising partnership. Together we formed a unique collaboration between an educator and an economist to assess not only if but also how the One World Cornerstone improves student writing.

The technical quantitative analysis of the writing of more than 550 DC students in AY 2015–16—currently available through the World Bank—suggests statistically significant improvement for over 70 percent (398 of 567) of the students evaluated, with greater gains made by the weakest writers (Wodon and Comstock). This qualitative analysis will study student and teacher impressions of the program by analyzing the results of surveys, informal interviews, and focus groups we conducted. The results provide a window into the difficulties and successes teachers, students, and administrators face in finding solutions to teaching writing within the framework of the CCSS.

### Student Focus Group Results

On March 16, 2016, we held two 30-minute focus groups with 23 students across the DCPS and DC charter schools. Additionally, on November 30, 2015, one of us held a 30-minute focus group with five students. These sessions were for students who had completed the program and had been nominated by their teachers for additional coaching to improve their writing. The students were nominated in recognition of their efforts, or simply because teachers felt that they had great potential for further learning through additional coaching. These were not necessarily the best students in their respective classes.

On balance, it was clear that these students either enjoyed the program or found it useful in developing their argumentative writing skills and abilities. This was especially evident in their enthusiastic insistence that future students should be required to go through the One World Education program. After all, when we inquired, many indicated that had never received substantial instruction in argumentative writing before this program, reflecting thereby the uneven and idiosyncratic role of writing in the standard curriculum. Most of these students, nevertheless, were keenly aware that learning to write well is essential to their future success.

Students praised the freedom to be able to write about topics that they care about. As one student stated, “It was something I was going through personally. I had a lot to say.” They found useful models (and interlocutors) in the work of their peers—published by OWEd—who had gone through the program in previous years. Students also commented positively about the dialogue that ensued in the process of composing. This dialogical approach together with the freedom to write about topics of their choice seems to have reached otherwise disengaged students; as one student noticed, “I think in my class, more people were interested in their argument. One girl who wrote about abortion, she’s usually pretty quiet. But she actually seemed pretty into writing her essay, I think because she got to choose it.” Still others were impressed with the range of writing skills they acquired through such engagements: “I learned proper research techniques, and how to elaborate more and express my thoughts.” Relatedly, it became clear through the conversations that students whose teachers departed from the One World Education method, and didn’t allow students to select their own topic for that essay, were less satisfied with their experience.

Furthermore, students also mostly believed that the program was a useful pedagogical tool for their teachers, who, the students claimed, used the program as an occasion to push them to craft more systematic and effective arguments. It is clear that teachers used the program as a reason to engage students in careful revisions: “[The] teacher helped us all the way to the final draft, day by day. He would grade us and give it back to us and we’d fix it.” Many students valued these close, process-oriented interactions the program fostered with their peers and teachers—that is, the zone of proximal development (ZPD) that engaged dialogic writing processes facilitate (Vygotsky). The NCTE Framework is unambiguous in recommending this approach, asserting that effective writing instruction engages students in specific rhetorical situations, teaching writing as a communicative process that determines its forms and conventions.

Additionally, because OWEd successfully introduced students to these moves, they enthusiastically viewed the program as good preparation for college. As one student responded, “I learned proper research techniques, and how to elaborate

more and express my thoughts.” Overall, we believe the mostly positive experiences these students had with the program make sense given that OWEd’s approach ideally meets students where they are, at the level of their interests, desires, talents, and development.

Students also had many suggestions for improvement, and about a third of the feedback suggested that One World Education was not necessarily better than other forms of writing instruction they had received. This type of feedback fit into three main, interrelated categories: (1) dissatisfaction with the writing process and workbook, (2) limited creativity, and (3) feeling that the program doesn’t meet the developmental needs of all students.

The first type involved dissatisfaction with having to learn argumentative moves using the workbook. Some students found the work, and the workbook—which scaffolds the writing process, entailing also practice in identifying and executing argumentative moves—to be “repetitive” or “not that interesting.” We believe that three factors may have led to this first type of criticism. First, generic complaints about mandatory work are to be expected from middle school and high school students for any specific type of assignment. Second, as many educators have argued following David Kolb’s early work, students have different learning styles, and variation in student experience with teaching materials is to be expected. Third, some of the students who gave this feedback seemed to have been in classes where the teacher, adapting the program to his or her purposes, actually dictated the topics that students had to research. Teachers who did this may have had good reasons, but these reasons work against the basic premise of the program that allowing students to pursue their own interests will result in more significant engagement and development.

The second type, related to the first, and which we take more seriously, pertained to perceived limitations on creativity involved in writing

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argumentative essays. As one student stated: “I didn’t like it. Because . . . I’m more like a creative person. When I feel like I’m being constricted to this book, I’m like, oh my god.” A few other students, having heard this suggestion, quickly agreed, stating that they were “creative types” that felt constrained by the program; they found the workbook to be repetitive and sometimes rote. There’s good reason not to ignore this input; however, points made about systematic instruction in argumentation working against student “creativity” may reflect a limited understanding of the term more than a flaw in the program. At least one student came to the same conclusion: “[OWEd was] about the same [as other writing we’ve done] . . . until you see that you have stuff to fix. We are always thinking that ‘my writing is good because it’s mine.’”

The third and final category, extending out of the first two, reflects what we believe to be a significant criticism of the program, offering clear direction for future improvement in the teaching of argumentative writing. Some students noted that the OWEd workbook may not only work better for some students than others (reflecting different learning styles) but may be too basic for more advanced writers. These students found all of the scaffolding unnecessary and, again, “repetitive.” As one student argued, “[The book] was just too much. The amount of pages was overwhelming; it was like you were repeating yourself but on a different page.” Other students similarly noted that the program was not advanced enough. However, the focus group also made clear that teachers have a lot of latitude in how they work with individual students through the program; this should partially alleviate concerns that the program may be “too easy” for some students.

Overall, we believe that the results of focus groups bear out the effectiveness of OWEd as measured separately by our quantitative analysis. Nevertheless, when the program is viewed as “one size fits all”—in relation to both learning style and development—the feedback suggests that it may become increasingly likely that the needs of some students will not be met. It is here that the first category of responses about the “repetitiveness” of the workbook resonates. That is, the responses from the students made it clear that where the program works, there must be a dialogic ZPD established

between the teacher and student. As we’ll discuss below, whatever curricular “life” OWEd facilitates originates in expert teaching.

### Teacher Survey Response Analysis

Seventeen teachers, representing approximately 20 percent (17 of 83) participating DCPS and DC charter school teachers, responded to an anonymous Web-based survey consisting of four open-ended questions and two Likert-scale questionnaires, each with 13 items. The open-ended questions were directed at programmatic improvement, while the Likert scales were crafted to assess teacher experience and measure satisfaction. Finally, there were two questions pertaining to personal/demographic information. In addition to the survey, we interviewed multiple teachers informally at various One World Cornerstone events over the course of the academic year.

Of the respondents, 15 of 17 (88.23 percent) said that they either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that “The One World Cornerstone PD sessions were a valuable use of my time.” The same proportion agreed that students improved their writing skills, and 16 of 17 (94.12 percent) indicated that the program improved research skills. Clearly, the overall feedback was enthusiastic. Many teachers believed the program worked just fine as is: “No changes!”; “The support we received was great.” Another stated, “I felt 100 percent supported and comfortable with making the curriculum support the needs of my students.” But while the program was clearly viewed positively overall, teachers were specifically asked to share ideas on how to improve it, and they had some interesting insights. We consider some of their insights here.

Significantly, some teachers echoed student concerns about a “one size fits all” model. As one teacher suggested, to improve, the program should “offer differentiated perspectives for lower performing learners.” Another stated, “Focus on strategies to modify the curriculum and specific lessons with lower performing students in mind.” And at least one teacher echoed student concerns about the limitations of the workbook in meeting the challenge of developmental differences: “I found my students got really excited about the project, but then they really got bogged down by the exemplars.”



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How to solve this problem? In varying ways, many answered that teachers require more time and more resources. For example, one teacher wanted more classroom support from One World Education itself; after all, “Having more people in the classroom is always helpful when working on individualized projects!” Scarcity is nothing new to teachers in the DCPS. And it was clear that most teachers appreciated the freedom OWEd gave them to customize the curriculum, better allowing them to do what they have always been unjustly asked to do: accomplish a lot with a little. Indeed, most teachers realized that they had freedom—and the responsibility—within the program to make necessary adjustments themselves. The problem, often, came down to having enough time; as one teacher claimed, they required “more time to create differentiation” in the program offerings between students.

Reflecting the dedication and creativity of these educators, many teachers proposed self-reflective and collaborative solutions. For instance, some remained optimistic that more experience teaching the program would allow them to adjust, and that the “second time through will be much better.” Others proposed creative solutions to fostering individualized instruction; one teacher wondered if OWEd couldn’t “Create a blog for teachers to discuss augmentations to One World Education Packets and creativity in the classroom with the

packets.” And many asked for more opportunities to collaborate.

A few teachers commented that implementation of the One World Cornerstone could be streamlined or simplified, again due to limits in the time available to teach the program. However, 16 of 17 (94.12 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that “Facilitator(s) effectively prepared me to implement the Cornerstone.” In a way, this combination of responses represents the challenges faced in closing the loop between the administration and teaching of the program. Again, there were frequent references to the problem of time: time for planning, time allotted for learning at the professional development (PD) sessions related to the program (which could have been better attended by teachers), and time to implement the program in the classroom. One teacher asked for more “time to plan the whole process before implementing.” Another succinctly reflected on a similar problem, stating that “the Cornerstone took much longer than the recommended time.” Scarcity of resources appeared in the comments in other ways as well, sometimes reflecting the hard realities of education in Washington DC and other similar low-income urban settings.

The One World Program requires, finally, that students write an argumentative essay, but this requirement presumes access to a computer. So one teacher asked, “Could One World perhaps participate more actively by meeting with individual students who do not have computer access and who may require one-on-one mentoring? Perhaps main library reserved use of computers for students after school or on Saturdays?” It is clear that in a situation of scarcity, teachers are repeatedly required to play compensatory roles. On the other hand, the teachers surveyed were really enthusiastic about the ways in which OWEd empowers them to put their talents to use; 16 of 17 (94.12 percent) of the teachers surveyed agreed that “With the revisions based on teacher feedback, I would recommend this Cornerstone for next year.”

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## Conclusion

The CCSS has opened the door for an authentic commitment to instruction in argumentative writing in our schools. Our findings here agree with Sandra Murphy and Mary Smith's conclusion that "[w]riting . . . is regaining prominence as an essential skill and tool for learning. And to the surprise of many, one impetus for these changes is the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)" (104). The incentives are aligned to foster opportunities to teach argumentative writing as part of a more serious, more sophisticated understanding of "college-readiness."

Evidence shows that both students and teachers found OWEd invigorating and empowering, reinforcing Chancellor Henderson's claim about the program's liveliness. However, it is also clear that without a larger investment, much of that life must be supplied by the teachers themselves, through their strategic and emotional investments. Without sustained investment, there is always a risk that imposing overly severe limits on implementation resources and program duration may lead to insufficient stop-gap solutions. The results from our evaluation of OWEd are highly encouraging, and some systematic study of argumentative writing is far superior to the alternative, but school districts and principals must ensure that teachers have the resources they need to implement the program well.

Finally, we believe the evidence here suggests that teachers and students alike are overwhelmed by the vast diversity of student writing ability. This is the result of idiosyncratic and uneven instruction in argumentative writing, revealed in the varied response we received when we asked students if they had written argumentative essays before. On the one hand, teachers are meeting this challenge with their own talents and creativity. However, only a more carefully sequenced curriculum such as that provided by OWEd will work to ensure more uniform

development in student writing. This will require a greater investment in time and resources, both of which we believe are sanctioned by CCSS. As George Hillocks Jr. reminds us, "Doing all of this takes time. But it is well worth the time and effort" (31). 

## Note

1. The authors of this article, independent researchers, have no financial connection with OWEd, the DCPS, or any of the DC charter schools that appear in this article.

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### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In the survey, both teachers and students said they did not want a one-size-fits-all approach to argumentation. This strategy guide provides teachers with strategies for helping students understand the differences between persuasive writing and evidence-based argumentation. Students become familiar with the basic components of an argument and then develop their understanding by analyzing evidence-based arguments about texts. Students then generate evidence-based arguments of texts using a variety of resources. <http://bit.ly/1KFCEiK>