Voices from the Middle, Volume 22 Number 1, September 2014

Mary E. Styslinger and Jessica F. Overstreet

Strengthening Argumentative Writing with Speaking and Listening (Socratic) Circles

Middle school students love to argue. Unfortunately, most equate argument with verbal combat, thinking that if they speak louder, with more passion, they stand a greater chance of convincing others of their rightful perspective.

We know argument relies less on volume and pathos and more on reason and logos, but we are reaching for the ways and means to make the structure and value of argument more apparent to students.

Writing argument is not easy. It is, after all, “the most highly prized type of academic discourse: something that is deemed essential to a thesis, to an article in a research journal, to a dissertation, essay, and to many other kinds of writing within schools and the academy” (Andrews, 2009). It is mainly about logical appeals, and it involves claims, evidence, warrants, backing, and rebuttals.

Students in the language arts classroom are specifically challenged to construct literary arguments, making a defensible yet debatable claim about a work of literature. As Smith, Wilhelm, and Fredricksen (2012) explain, evidence comes from mining the work of literature in support of the claim. The warrant offers a reason about what an author might have intended something to mean or posits how he or she might have made different choices so as to imply a different meaning. The rebuttal considers other perspectives. Literary arguments can make judgments about characters and their actions, suggest central ideas of a text, or evaluate the text itself.

We know some oral arguments can strengthen written ones (Andrews, 2009), so it makes sense to utilize language activities that encourage students to make claims about works of literature, defend those with evidence, offer warrants, and consider rebuttals. We decided to utilize Socratic Circles with 26 eighth graders as a means of prewriting argument. Students would collect evidence through participation in inner and outer circles; the former encourages speaking and the latter, listening.

We engaged in an inquiry linking to the speaking and listening circles and their impact on written argument. We asked two questions: 1) What is the nature of student talking and listening during Socratic Circles? 2) What are the effects of student talking and listening circles on argumentative writing? The remainder of this article describes our process for implementing Socratic Circles, explores the language of speaking and listening circles, and considers the effects the circles have on writing argument.

Structuring Argument with Socratic Circles

Socrates was convinced that the surest way to attain reliable knowledge was through the practice of disciplined conversation, which he called a dialectic. A dialectic is the art or practice of examining opinions or ideas logically, often by the method of question and answer, so as to de-
termine their validity; by extension, a Socratic Circle is a method to foster an understanding of information by creating a dialectic in which participants seek deeper comprehension of complex ideas through rigorously thoughtful dialogue. In a Socratic Circle, students read and take notes on a text. They create questions to ask one another about what they have read. They are then divided into inner and outer circles. Students in the inner circle engage in a discussion, and those in the outer circle listen carefully, providing feedback once the inner circle discussion of the text is complete. Students in both circles then exchange roles and positions (Copeland, 2005).

We incorporated Socratic Circles when reading Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. The guiding essential questions for the unit asked students to consider: “To what extent are Romeo and Juliet victims of fate or their own poor decisions? Who is responsible for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet?” The questions required students to take a stance and find evidence to support their claims. Students participated in two Socratic Circles.

The first circle occurred after Act 3. The students were paired up, and each pair composed three open-ended discussion questions. Students in the inner circle were asked to participate at least three times while making specific references to the text. Students in the outer circle were given Netbooks, instructed to listen carefully, and asked to make at least two comments on the discussion occurring in the inner circle.

The second circle occurred after students had completed reading the play. Students were asked to consider who was ultimately responsible for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet. In addition, they were instructed to use their preparation and participation in Socratic Circles to help them compose an essay that would argue who they thought was responsible for those deaths.

The Language of Speaking and Listening Circles

Whereas most of the students engaged in lively conversation in the inner/speaking circle—a discussion that centered on who bore responsibility for the deaths—they struggled to support claims with direct evidence from the text. As detailed here, students grappled with Romeo’s rash decision to kill himself:

**RENE:** I think if it was somebody I loved and somebody said they was dead, I wouldn’t believe that. I would be trying to slap them in the face or wake them up or something.

**EDWARD:** But he sees her in the tomb.

**RENE:** I would go to them and start crying. I wouldn’t just kill myself. That’s unreasonable thinking.

**EDWARD:** And didn’t he say her lips were golden?

**RENE:** But the poison was supposed to make her appear lifeless. It was supposed to do that.

**TROY:** But she was going to wake up.

**RENE:** But it’s weird that Romeo didn’t even talk to the Friar about it.

In this brief exchange, students made excellent personal connections and used those connections to support their claims; however, they failed to refer to the text as a data source. When Edward questioned whether Juliet’s lips are described as golden, he missed an opportunity to use the text to refute or support Rene’s claim that Romeo was unreasonable when he killed himself. Students blogging in the outer/listening circle also failed to use the text to support opinions.

Finally, two students in the inner/speaking circle used the text to support their opposing claims:

**TROY:** Balthazar? But he was trying to help Romeo.

**RENE:** He didn’t help anybody.

**EDWARD:** But he didn’t know that he wasn’t helping. He was trying to.

**RENE:** But he wasn’t minding his business, either.

**EDWARD:** But [pages turning] Romeo is the
one that asked him if there was news from Verona. In Act 5, scene 1, page 725, he says, “News from Verona, How now Balthazar.”

RENE: Okay, but if it’s news, somebody had to tell you to go tell him. It wasn’t news. He just told it and thought he should go tell it.

EDWARD: How do you . . .?

RENE: Because he said it.

LATOYA: What did he say?

RENE: He said . . . [pages turning]

LATOYA: He didn’t know, because like, say you saw a chicken running around outside. Wouldn’t you tell the principal?

[Chorus of “No”]

RENE: If there’s a fight going and you’re running around and hollerin’, they’re going to think you’re associated with the fight. Am I right?

EDWARD: So what did Balthazar say?

RENE: In Act 5, scene 1, line 20, “I saw her laid low in the Capulet’s vault.” So he saw her. Ain’t nobody going to tell him to tell him.

It’s clear that only a small number of students explicitly referred to lines of text as support.

The Effects of Circles on Written Argument

As expected, students who did not substantiate claims with textual evidence during inner/speaking or outer/listening circles failed to do so when writing. And students who did explicitly refer to the text during Socratic Circles did so when writing. Rene, for example, explicitly referred to the text to defend her claim during the circles, and in her essay, she substantiates her claims as well:

Because Romeo and Juliet really loved each other they risked their own lives, which ended up in their death, because they thought they were doing what was best for the other. When Juliet decides to “kill” herself “And hide me with a dead man in her shroud” (4.1.85), she thought she was doing what was best for Romeo. And, when Romeo decides to go back to Verona and kill himself, “Come, cordial and not poison, go with me to Juliet’s grave; for their [sic] must I use thee (the poison)” (5.1.85–86). Romeo thought he was doing what was best for Juliet so they could be together. Because neither Romeo nor Juliet knew both sides of the decision the other was making, resulted in their death.

Rene’s shift in perspective is most intriguing. During a Socratic Circle, she blamed Balthazar for Romeo’s death, but in her essay, she argues Romeo’s and Juliet’s poor decisions result in their deaths. It is clear that Rene’s prior exchange with Edward provided the opportunity to consider Romeo’s responsibility. During the Socratic Circle, Rene insisted Balthazar was responsible because he is the one who shares the news with Romeo. Edward, however, argued Balthazar simply shared information. The excerpt from Rene’s essay makes it clear she reconsidered her original position.

Likewise, the Socratic Circles provided students the opportunity to discover counterarguments to claims. Alyssa acknowledged a possible counterclaim to her argument, writing:

Many people think that fate was the cause of Romeo and Juliet’s death because they were a pair of star-crossed lovers, so they think that fate put them together and that fate was the causes for their death. It was Romeo and Juliet’s fault that they died because they made bad decisions.

Furthermore, Alyssa was able to refute the claims of students who argued fate was responsible for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet. She wrote:

For Romeo to make the decision to go to the Capulet’s Ball was a bad decision because he knew the Prince said if they fight one more time someone will be killed. Romeo himself said, “some consequence yet hanging in the stars shall bitterly begin . . . some vile forfeit of untimely death” (1.4.107–111). [For] Romeo to make the decision to go to the Capulet’s Ball was a bad decision because he knew something bad was going to happen. So now Romeo has to deal with the consequences for going to the Capulet’s Ball.

In every Socratic Circle there are students who remain silent. We discovered silence does not equate with a lack of engagement. One quiet
student, Lyn, clearly was processing the information exchanged during the Socratic Circles. During her participation in the outer/listening circle, she defended Lord Capulet, blogging, “Lord Capulet is not part of Juliet’s death because he didn’t know anything that was going on, just that she had to marry Paris.” In her essay, she argued Romeo and Juliet are responsible for their own deaths:

Romeo and Juliet are the cause for their death, because it’s their decision to be together. Juliet would do anything for Romeo. When Juliet sees Romeo dead she wants to die with him. Juliet says, “If all else fails, myself have the power to die.” Juliet says this because if all the plans fail, she has the power to kill herself.

Clearly, listening strengthened Lyn’s argument.

Katherine is another student who was quiet during the Socratic Circle, but she was also clearly engaged in the learning process. During the outer/listening circle, she argued Lord Capulet was responsible for Romeo’s and Juliet’s deaths, but she did not support her claim with evidence. She simply blogged, “I think Lord Capulet caused Juliet’s death. Romeo’s death followed.” In her essay, she mined the text, using quotations to illustrate and strengthen her claim.

**Strengthening Argumentative Writing**

Engaging in Socratic Circles had little effect on our students’ ability to provide evidence to support claims. Students who verbally supported claims usually did so when writing; students who failed to verbally support claims rarely did so when writing. However, the exchange of different ideas and perspectives, spoken and heard, led our students to reconsider initial perspectives and consider counterarguments, as exemplified by Rene and Alyssa. Listening to the claims of others aids in the construction of written argument, and hearing alternative views helps students better formulate rebuttals. Seeing this principal proved true in student essays, we were reminded of the power of listening when formulating argument. More than one student demonstrated an enhanced ability to compose an argument after taking notes during Socratic Circles.

The importance of argument is reflected in the CCSS College and Career Readiness Standards for Writing as well as for Speaking and Listening. But before students can write arguments, they must practice a model for reasoning, and the best way to do so is through structured speaking and listening engagements. Ultimately, argument is a form of academic discourse. Its inclusion and emphasis in the Common Core State Standards is grounded in the fact that an understanding of and respect for argument is essential to participation in a democratic society. We want our classrooms to be places where students think critically, exchange ideas, and celebrate different perspectives. With Socratic Circles, our students demonstrated a growing awareness of varied perspectives.

**CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK**

**Socratic Seminars**

The ReadWriteThink.org strategy guide “Socratic Seminars” explains Socratic seminars and offers practical methods for applying the approach in your classroom to help students investigate multiple perspectives in a text.

http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/socratic-seminars-30600.html

Lisa Fink

www.readwritethink.org

*Voices from the Middle*, Volume 22 Number 1, September 2014
viewpoints that positively affected their written composition of counterarguments and rebuttals. In these ways, speaking and listening (Socratic) circles strengthened argumentative writing.

References


Mary E. Styslinger is an associate professor of English and literacy education at the University of South Carolina, where she also directs the Midlands Writing Project. Jessica F. Overstreet is in her fourth year of teaching at New Ellenton Middle School; she teaches eighth-grade English language arts.