

Preface

The Most Reasonable Answer: Helping Students Build Better Arguments Together is a book about teaching students to reach better, more reasonable conclusions by building and evaluating arguments *together*. In addition to focusing on the need to support rigorous thinking, we also place special emphasis on the collaborative nature of argumentation. In this way, our book differs from other publications that deal with arguments developed individually or with the primary goal of persuading others.¹ Our goal in writing this book is to help elementary school teachers engage students in discussions about the texts they read for the purpose of collectively determining what is more reasonable to believe or do, rather than winning over opponents.

This book is written at a time when our nation is deeply divided about what to believe or do about many important issues, ranging from climate change to health care to immigration. Moreover, there is a growing concern that we do not seem to share certain foundational norms and strategies for resolving our disagreements, or, in other words, for talking and thinking about complex, controversial issues together. At news conferences, TV shows, work meetings, and family gatherings, we see people talking *past*, not *with* each other. Often this happens when they play different kinds of conversational games and rely on different assumptions about the purpose of the discussion, the rules of participating, and the criteria for evaluating the quality of arguments. As a result, people routinely fall short of having a civil, rigorous, and collaborative discussion that brings about a better understanding of each other and the world around them.

Yet, productive engagement in argumentation may be one of the few options we have to resolve disagreements in a way that leads to better decisions and peaceful

coexistence. For this reason, in 1995, an American educator and theorist named Neil Postman urged schools to teach students “how to argue, and to help them discover what questions are worth arguing about, and, of course, to make sure they know what happens when arguments cease.”² He also explained that “when arguments cease—blood happens, as in our Civil War, when we stopped arguing with one another.”³

Today, major policy documents, academic publications, and the popular press expect teachers to prepare their students to become independent thinkers capable of negotiating the dynamic, globalized, and information-rich environment of the twenty-first century.⁴ According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative, for example, students should develop the ability to comprehend and formulate arguments through speaking, listening, reading, and writing—or *argument literacy*.⁵ They should learn to “think critically and deeply, assess the validity of their own thinking, and anticipate counterclaims in opposition to their own assertions.”⁶ These are commendable goals, but they place heavy demands on teachers and require new approaches to instruction.

Unfortunately, despite broad agreement about the value of argument literacy, not enough resources have been made available to support teachers, as well as others concerned with classroom practice, in their efforts to foster the skills of argumentation. Currently, few research-based materials are designed for teachers who want to offer their students opportunities to experience the challenges and joys of collaborative and rigorous argumentation. Especially lacking are instructional materials made for upper elementary students. This scarcity of resources is regrettable considering that these students are developmentally ready to engage in argumentation and we know they can improve their skills through such engagement.⁷ In fact, we see the upper elementary grades as an ideal context in which teachers can nurture students’ emerging argument literacy skills. Lack of quality resources for fostering argumentation in elementary classrooms is also problematic given that recent educational policies, including the Common Core State Standards, describe argument literacy as an intended educational outcome for students at every grade level.⁸ As researchers and teacher educators, we wanted to address this gap by developing effective instructional methods and classroom materials with and for practitioners.

This book reflects current educational theory and research on the benefits of discussions centered around argumentation to support the development of students’

higher-order thinking.⁹ It draws on our previous work with established pedagogical frameworks, such as *Philosophy for Children* and *Collaborative Reasoning*, as well as on our expertise with text-based discussion and argumentation.¹⁰ But, above all, this book is based on what we have learned from a recent, multiyear program of research called “Dialogic Teaching: Professional Development in Classroom Discussion to Improve Students’ Argument Literacy.”¹¹ This research was sponsored by a grant from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), US Department of Education, with Drs. Wilkinson and Reznitskaya serving as coprincipal investigators.

As part of this project, colleagues from The Ohio State University and Montclair State University partnered with upper elementary school teachers to design curriculum materials and activities that support teacher learning and use of new discussion practices. Over four years, a total of 49 teachers and 935 students from public schools in Ohio and New Jersey participated in this research. Participants came from urban and suburban school districts, including schools with high percentages of minority and economically disadvantaged students. Each year, we worked collaboratively with a new cohort of teachers and students to identify and organize instructional content and activities. We systematically collected data from teachers and students to assess the effectiveness of the program and inform its revisions. Our results consistently showed that by the end of the school year, teachers and students learned to use new discussion practices and engage in the critical and collaborative construction of arguments in relation to big, contestable questions raised by their readings.

Our multiyear partnership with teachers was invaluable for helping us discover what was beneficial (and what wasn’t) in the classroom. In this book, we share field-tested methods, materials, tools, and activities that we developed from this partnership. We are grateful to all the collaborating teachers who helped us create what we hope to be a useful resource for practitioners concerned with helping their students become better thinkers.