Lori Czop Assaf and Joël Johnson

A Call for Action: Engaging in Purposeful, Real-World Writing

"Over the past four years, our writing instruction has been scripted. We used to do real writing. I would let them pick something they really cared about and they loved it. If they really cared about it, they were more interested."
—Kristi [pseudonym]

The quote above comes from a middle school teacher who participated in a two-year professional development book club focused on purposeful writing. Knowing that students have little ownership when writing is presented as a school-based exercise, we considered the importance of implementing writing lessons that provided students with the opportunity to engage in authentic, purposeful writing instruction. During our initial book discussions, we took to heart Gallagher's (2011) belief in the importance of purposeful writing:

> If we want our students to understand the value writing can play in their lives, maybe we should consider shifting instruction away from strict adherence to the traditional discourses and begin having our students explore the real reasons why writers write. (p. 8)

As Gallagher recommended, we challenged the traditional language and practices related to school-based writing and grappled with ways to help students uncover the importance of real-world writing. We wondered:

- how to find the time in our daily schedules and the appropriate texts necessary to provide students with purposeful writing opportunities;

- how to negotiate the district's mandated curriculum and testing schedule to meet our students' learning needs; and

- what kinds of purposeful writing projects would prepare our students for college and serve them in their future careers.

And in the end, with all our wonderings, we concluded that it was our job to teach students not only *how* to write, but also *why* they must write.

During year two, with a firm resolution to provide more purposeful writing opportunities, we revised multiple lessons, met monthly to share our insights, and reflected on our teaching and our students' work. During one of our meetings, Joël, one of the six teachers in the book club, recalled:

> My district curriculum suggested that students write a letter to the principal to change a school policy. Last year, I did just that. Though I allowed students to participate in inquiry-based instruction to build their background knowledge about persuasive appeals and techniques, I still required that they write the letter. I was very disappointed when I read 120 papers that were almost identical. . . . I knew I had failed at showing them the true purpose behind persuasive writing.

In this article, we describe how Joël redesigned a lesson and created the unit "A Call for Action" six months after the end of our book club.

First, let us introduce ourselves. Lori Czop Assaf is a university professor and director of a local writing project. Joël Johnson is a seventh-grade English language arts teacher at a middle

school situated in a small suburban community 20 miles outside of a large southwestern city. Most of Joël's students are Spanish dominant, self-identify as Mexican American, and are on free or reduced lunch. For the past five years, Lori and Joël have collaborated on a variety of inquiry-based writing projects (e.g., Assaf, Ash, Saunders, & Johnson, 2011). For this project, Lori facilitated the book club and year two meetings and served as a critical friend, giving teachers feedback on their lesson plans, videotaping their instruction, and conducting post-lesson interviews.

Overview of the Unit

In the "A Call for Action" unit, Joël taught her students how writing can be used in the real world to change a situation or positively impact an important issue. She focused on rhetorical techniques and persuasive appeals to change readers' points of view and bring about change, aligning her instruction with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (National Governors Association, 2010, ELA Literacy W.7.1 & W.7.10). Joël used multiple *complex mentor texts*, inquiry-based instruction, and a variety of writing activities over ten days to teach her students how to write petition letters and create multimedia products

to publish their message. This two-week unit provided students with a sense of purpose and audience while creating a venue in which they could develop their voices and speak out about something bigger than themselves. By engaging in this unit, students not only learned *how* to write persuasively, but also *came to understand the power of writing* in the real world.

In the next section, we describe a spiral model of curriculum (Bruner, 1977) and deep scaffolding (Brown & Broemmel, 2011), two theories that supported Joël's writing unit. Then we describe the steps and texts used to engage students in purposeful, persuasive writing.

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Spiral Model and Deep Scaffolding

In 1977, Bruner introduced a process of continuous learning known as the spiral model of curriculum. The spiral model emphasizes that curriculum and instruction should revisit basic ideas previously learned, repeatedly building on them until students fully understand new concepts. In a spiral model, "learning is better

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CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

Persuasive Writing Strategies

In the ReadWriteThink.org lesson, "Developing Persuasive Arguments through Ethical Inquiry: Two Prewriting Strategies," students use focused prewriting strategies to explore content and ethical issues related to a persuasive assignment. These strategies work best after students have established their topic and audience and have begun exploring their rhetorical (writing) situation as it relates to a specific, local problem about which they have some knowledge.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/developing-persuasive-arguments-through-30744.html

These strategies would pair well with "Persuading the Principal: Writing Persuasive Letters about School Issues."

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/persuading-principal-writing-persuasive-1137.html

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achieved through discovery and problem solving, engaging students in hypothesis, questioning, and discussing inquiries" (Bruner, 1977, p. 56).

The spiral model connects to theories on scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). In the process of scaffolding, the teacher helps the student master a task or concept that he or she may not be able to master independently. Brown and Broemmel (2011) use the term "deep scaffolding" to describe the most effective support for students' reading comprehension and writing, especially for ELLs working in an English academic environment. Deep scaffolding aims to raise the level of comprehensibility of a text by making it more accessible through appropriate cultural examples and the reduction of language barriers. Deep scaffolding engages all students, but especially ELLs, because teachers encourage active participation through inquiry and small-group discussions. In deep scaffolding, teachers must plan ahead in order to help students gain access to the meaning, structure, and language demands of a text, as well as to build connections to their life experiences (Brown & Broemmel, 2011).

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Preparing for the Unit

Understanding the importance of a spiral curriculum and deep scaffolding, Joël prepared for the unit by identifying the persuasive devices highlighted in her district's curriculum. She then searched for multiple complex mentor texts (traditional and multimedia) that would engage her students, provide examples of the various devices, and serve as quality models of persuasive writing. We define *complex mentor texts* as literary and informational text sets that represent multiple readability and difficulty levels and serve as models for writing (Ray, 1999).

Keeping in mind that using more than one text on a particular topic facilitates comprehension and that "easier texts in the set build background knowledge that make the more difficult texts easier to understand" (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p. 139), Joël identified the readability of each text. She then layered or arranged the texts based on readability and relevance to scaffold students' comprehension and linguistic needs. Next, she designed collaborative activities and inquiry centers to encourage active participation and differentiation (Wilhelm, 2012). In addition, Joël familiarized herself with a variety of digital writing tools, such as free websites and blogs (http://education.weebly.com/), Google Docs, Facebook, Prezi (http://prezi.com/), and podcasts (http://www.podbean.com/start-podcast) in order to help students publish their writing for real audiences. For an overview of the "Call to Action" unit, see Figure 1.

A Multilayered Approach

Making Appeals

Knowing that most young adolescents typically use sophisticated claims and counterclaims in their everyday conversations (Felton & Herko, 2004), Joël divided her students into small groups and asked them to discuss different kinds of appeals used in their everyday lives and the importance of audience. Next, modifying Gallagher's (2011) *Take a Stand* (an instructional activity to help students develop persuasive writing skills), she had the students identify an issue, then argue the issue from multiple perspectives—emphasizing the importance of point of view and purpose. Following these small-group activities, students learned three rhetorical devices for persuasion: *logos* (logic, statistics, or factual information), *pathos* (emotions), and *ethos* (credibility or trust).

Defining and Applying Devices

Joël and her students revisited the rhetorical devices of persuasion and wrote definitions and symbols for each term in their writers' notebooks. To practice identifying and naming logos, pa-

1. **Making Appeals:** Engage students in small-group discussions and games to articulate the use of appeals in their everyday lives and practice arguing issues from multiple points of view.
2. **Defining Devices:** As a whole group, students write definitions and draw symbols for three rhetorical devices of persuasion: *logos* (logic, statistics, or factual information), *pathos* (emotions), and *ethos* (credibility or trust).
3. **Applying Devices:** Students read and explore multiple magazine and commercial advertisements, then identify specific appeals and exaggerations, categorical claims, ad hominems, and stereotypes. Use a graphic organizer to organize notes and compare across texts. Identify one advertisement and rewrite it using a persuasive device.
4. **Exploring Layered, Complex Mentor Texts**: As a whole class, students read MLK's *I Have a Dream Speech*, Obama's *2008 Inauguration Speech,* and the Will.i.am video of *Yes We Can Obama Song* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjXyqcx-mYY) with the explicit intention of learning about persuasive writing. Students pay close attention to audience, genre, and purpose, and how particular texts appeal to different audiences based on demographics, age, gender, and time. Discuss as a whole class. Next, students choose one speech and reanalyze in a small group. They identify persuasive devices, write personal responses to each speech, and present findings and responses to the class.
5. **A Plan for Petition Writing:** Using a circular graphic organizer, students brainstorm issues they want to convince others to change specifically related to their home, school, community, and world. Students see *two* viewings of the youtube video of eighth grader McKenna Pope who wrote a petition letter on Change.org calling for the toy manufacturer Hasbro to make gender-neutral Easy-Bake Ovens (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHESKyxrxJM&feature=youtube_gdata_player). Then they identify the importance of audience, purpose, and specific persuasive devices in Pope's ipetition.
6. **Learning from a Mentor Text**: As a class, students reread and reanalyze Pope's ipetition, create a class chart of persuasive devises used in this mentor text, then create an outline for their own petition.
7. **Writing to a Real Audience**: Students brainstorm multimedia possibilities and potential audiences to publish work. They draft, conference, revise, edit, and publish their ipetitions and create multimedia tools to publish their work.

Figure 1. Steps for the "Call to Action" unit

thos, and ethos in real-world texts, students gathered in small inquiry groups. Moving to different centers, they read and explored multiple magazine and commercial advertisements. Using an *I Chart*, a graphic organizer used to organize notes and compare features across multiple texts (Assaf, Ash, Saunders, & Johnson, 2011), students noted specific appeals and identified exaggerations, categorical claims, ad hominems (arguments made personally against an opponent), and stereotypes.

Following this investigation, students identified one advertisement and rewrote it using one or more persuasive devices (see Fig. 2). This activity not only allowed students to deconstruct multimedia advertisements, but also provided them with an opportunity to practice using persuasive devises in their own writing. Joël knew that explicitly teaching the academic language of persuasion and having students apply it to their own writing would encourage her students to develop more sophisticated writing abilities while also improving their understanding of genre (Langer, 2011).

Figure 2. This student used the "Pathos, Ethos, and Logos Graphic Organizer" to present a persuasive alternative to a current product ad.

Exploring Layered, Complex Mentor Texts

Knowing the importance of revisiting topics and strategies by guiding students through complex texts (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008), Joël had her class listen to and read MLK's "I Have a Dream" speech, Obama's 2008 Inaugural Address, and Will.i.am video of the "Yes We Can" Obama song (www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjXyqcx-mYY*).* They approached these texts with the explicit intention of learning about persuasive writing (Ray, 1999). They focused on audience, genre, and purpose, and noted how particular texts appealed to different audiences based on demographics, age, gender, and time.

This inquiry aided students in gaining access to the meaning, language, and structure used in speeches while helping them envision the purpose of such texts— to persuade.

To provide a deeper analysis of the language and devices used in speeches, the students reread and analyzed one of the two speeches in small groups. They identified devices such as exaggeration and repetition of key words and phrases; then they wrote personal responses to each speech. This inquiry aided students in gaining access to the meaning, language, and structure used in speeches while helping them envision the purpose of such texts—to persuade.

A Plan for Petition Writing

Building on the students' interests, Joël asked her class to think of a situation they wanted to convince others to change. Using a circular graphic organizer, students brainstormed topics related to their home, school, community, and world. Starting in the center of the circle, they identified topics such as chores, bullying, unhealthy cafeteria food, hazardous roads, conditions in some animal shelters, childhood obesity, and world hunger (see Fig. 3). The students first brainstormed ideas independently and then shared their ideas in collaborative groups. They

were encouraged to add ideas to their graphic organizer as their peers shared.

Next they viewed the YouTube video of eighth grader McKenna Pope, who wrote a petition letter on www.change.org calling for the toy manufacturer Hasbro to make gender-neutral Easy-Bake Ovens (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHESKyxrxJM&feature=youtube_gdata_player). In her video, Pope explicitly asked viewers to sign her ipetition and send a letter to the company demanding action. The students watched the video twice, once to get a general sense of the message and again to verbally identify the importance of audience, purpose, and specific persuasive devices. Then they read a newspaper report describing how Hasbro responded to Pope's plea (after she received over 45,000 signatures) and announced their plans to market a silver and black Easy-Bake Oven for both boys and girls.

Learning from a Mentor Text

On the following day, students closely read, analyzed, and emulated (Graham & Perin, 2007)
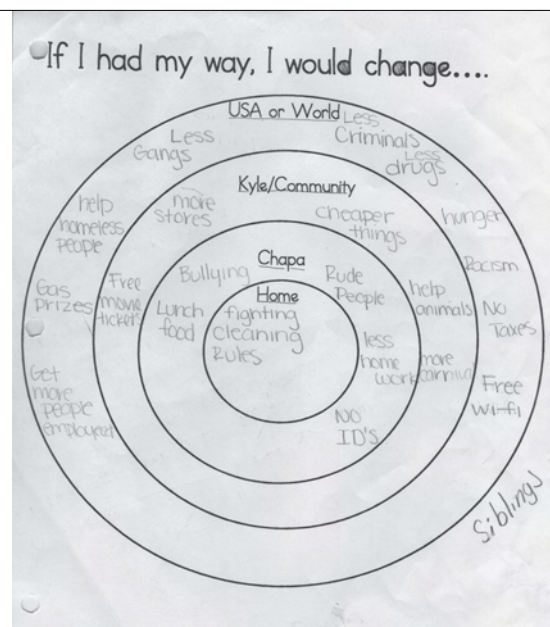

Figure 3. Sample graphic organizer showing one student's brainstorming on topics for a potential persuasive writing piece.

Pope's ipetition. As they read, they noticed how the first three sentences of the text "tell the story of the problem" and how Pope clearly stated a thesis and supporting claims for each appeal. At the end of the ipetition, Pope explicitly called for action by asking readers to "please, sign this petition . . . help me in creating gender equality" (see Fig. 4).

Figure 4. Annotated mentor text from YouTube

Following this deep analysis of the mentor text, the students created an outline for their own petitions and brainstormed multimedia possibilities to publish their work, including flyers, websites, tweets, podcasts, Facebook posts, Instagrams, and videos. The outline served as a scaffold for the students to use in their writing, and the multimedia products served as real-world publishing possibilities, thus creating relevance and significance for this unit.

The students effectively applied persuasive devices in their writing, identified real-life examples, applied narrative storylines, and used strong voice in each piece of writing, illustrating their personal commitment and passion toward their topics.

Writing to a Real Audience

The students chose a topic they felt passionate about and wrote for two days: planning, drafting, and revising their final papers. They engaged in small-group writing conferences and peer editing. Most of the students submitted their petitions on www.change.org while others created different public venues on which to publish their writing (see Fig. 5). For example, Daniel [all student names are pseudonyms] created a website and short video seeking to persuade Nike and Reebok to create professional jerseys for the Women's National Basketball Association http://fight4wnbajerseys.weebly.com/index.html. Jordy focused on the importance of publishing students' artwork in public venues. In addition to a website, Jordy created posters and distributed them to local businesses (see Fig. 6). Maria cre-

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Help with World Hunger

Candice, my 4 year old sister, loves to speak her mind. Anything that she notices, she will say what it looks like to her. Also, she likes to question different things she sees. For instance my mother, sister and I were just pulling out of H-E-B, and we were waiting at the stop light when seeing a man crying on the side walk while holding his stomach. We all noticed a sign he was holding that said "Any kind of food will help."

"Why is that man crying, Mommy?" My sister asked. I sat there and I thought, is this what we want our little brother or sister to see? Hunger on the corner of a stoplight? What has this world come too? Last time I checked, the world was unselfish and very much giving? What will we do about this?

After seeing this, the message to many other people and I was that there still is hungry people out there. The clear message is that throughout the world there are thousands of people suffering from hunger. But the real question is, what are we going to do about this?

I want to end world hunger; I can't stand seeing people hungry! I want to end people dying every day from hunger. I want to end the stomach growling inside of little incent babies. I want to end teenagers that don't come to school because there to busy looking for food. I want to end poor adults faces when they relies they can't feed their children or themself. This needs to stop. Not only in the U.S. but throughout the whole world!

When people eat there isn't a problem working. With people working it makes our society a better economical place. For those who are under the age of 16 years old, it's great for them to be able to eat because they will go to school and wont to be worrying about if they're going to get to eat or not. It even makes our community a better place, academically when people go to school and worrying about a test and not worrying about how hungry they are. Not only that, but hunger shouldn't be a problem. No one should have to suffer because they don't have any food to eat.

Please join me and "Feeding America" to end world hunger. We will stop world hunger. And the way you can help is to donate money, even if it's just one penny. Or you could sign my petition - to make sure that the fast food places donate money to end world hunger. The smallest amount of effort to sign my petition or donate money could still help our world and save someone's life. Sign this petition if you think fast food places should donate money to the "Feeding America" company from 3-6 P.M. every Monday, Friday and Saturday. Think of it as if that was your child and you couldn't feed it. Not only that, you also didn't have anyone to count on. We are the ones that can help those children and adults without any food. We are the people that can stop and eliminate world hunger. Please donate money to "Feeding America" at https://secure.feedingamerica.org/site/SPageServer?pagename=giveonline&s_src=Y13YADDPD&s_subsrc=hungerdonation&gclid=CJPQqJLAlbUCFdSLPAodOjkAyw or sign my petition—to help those children and adults live another day.
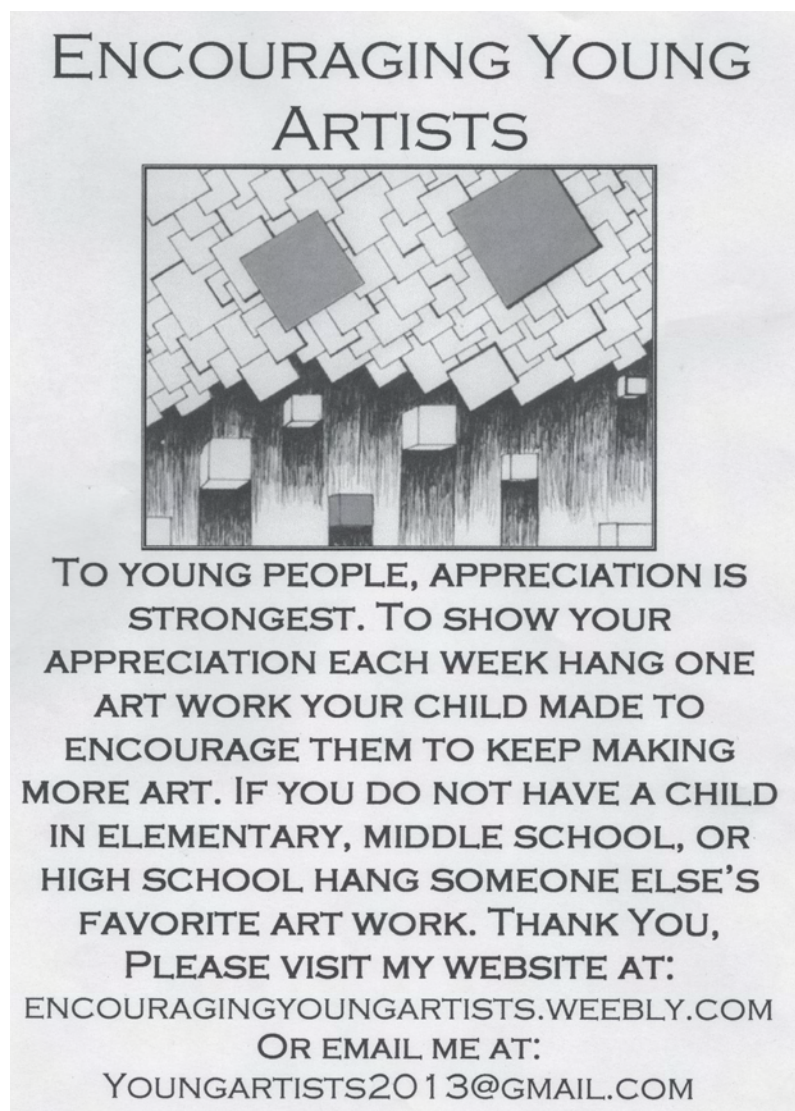
Figure 5. Example of an ipetition

Figure 6. Jordy distributed this poster to local businesses to bring attention to his website on the value of publishing student artwork.

using mentor texts and being inspired by another teen who actually made a difference. Jordy explained, "I learned that you have to be brave and courageous . . . . the girl in the video was so dedicated and it inspired me to do the same." Julia shared, "It showed me that someone my age can really make a difference. I mean, I didn't think I could really use my petition to convince others, but I can." These young adolescents also identified the importance of choice and solving a problem. Conrad admitted, "A Call to Action encouraged me to pick something I was interested in. . . . I had the freedom to choose." And Dante noted, "I picked racism because it is a problem that we need to solve. I want others to know it still exists."

To get a deeper understanding of what skills the students learned, we printed out several petitions and shared them with our book club. We asked teachers to tell us what they noticed about the students' writing. The teachers unanimously agreed: the students effectively applied persuasive devices in their writing, identified real-life examples, applied narrative storylines, and used strong voice in each piece of writing, illustrating their personal commitment and passion toward their topics. One teacher noted, "The students really cared about this writing."

We agreed with their evaluations. Students were invested in the process not only because they had something to say and knew their writing would have an impact outside of school (Wilhelm & Smith, 2006), but also because the unit provided them control over their topic and audience. With careful scaffolding and a variety

ated a Facebook page asking friends and family to write a letter to First Lady Michelle Obama about lowering the cost of healthy foods and decreasing childhood obesity (see Fig. 7).

What We Learned

After students completed their projects, we wondered whether—and if so, how—this real-world writing unit made a difference in their learning and engagement. To better understand, Lori interviewed a group of students about their projects. All the students noted the importance of

Figure 7. Screen capture of Maria's Facebook page designed to solicit a letter-writing campaign to fight childhood obesity

of complex, relevant mentor texts, the students were able to revisit and master skills necessary to successfully complete their final projects.

Developing purposeful, real-world writing takes time and a great deal of effort. Caby described it best in her letter to the city council: "We've got to repave and widen the roads. We need to make time. . . . We need to stop waiting around for someone else do to the work." We believe it is important that we all repave the roads of literacy education to help our students see the value and purpose in real writing. Rather than bumpy, scripted curricula and lessons full of school-based, insignificant writing, we must provide roads for students to travel that will help them find real purpose in reaching their destinations.

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