

PLANNING A COMPREHENSION INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE LESSON

Text-Based Discussions

Background/Research (taken from Michael Kamil's research)

Research shows that classrooms with frequent extended discussions show greater literacy gains than classes that have little or no opportunity for discussion. Discussion helps students question and summarize what they've read, refer back to the text, make connections, and listen to other points of view. Students are able to hear what effective readers do, and then apply the strategies when they read independently.

Three types of discussion have been evaluated for effects on comprehension of text. The first of these discussion types, efferent discussion, refers to discussion that is focused on the text and what it says. Students focus their conversation on the meaning of specific words and phrases, images within the text, etc. Students are not to discuss their feelings about the text, but what it actually says. Examples include Instructional Conversations (Goldenberg, 1993), Junior Great Books Shared Inquiry (Great Books Foundation, 1987) and Questioning the Author (Beck & McKeown, 2006; McKeown & Beck, 1990).

The second type of discussion is referred to as afferent, or expressive. This type of discussion entails affective response. Students provide their opinions, or reactions, to stories. Examples include Book Club (Raphael & McMahon, 1994), Grand Conversations (Eeds & Wells, 1989) and Literature Circles (Short & Pierce, 1990). Research suggests that this tends to be the most popular type of classroom discussion.

The final type of discussion is a method that has been coined critical analytic. The intent of this discussion is to debate ideas. Students engage in interrogating the text and asking about the author. Examples include Collaborative Reasoning (Anderson, Chinn, Waggoner, & Nguyen, 1998), Paideia Seminar (Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002) and Philosophy for Children (1995). Studies on this type of conversation showed few approaches that increased inferential comprehension or improved critical thinking.

Researchers were surprised to discover the most beneficial type of discussion to be efferent discussion which increased student talk and comprehension more than the other types. Efferent discussion focused on what the text actually says, not what it meant or how they could use it. Efferent discussion was found to be most beneficial to poor readers, who often can't read and comprehend the text in any other way. Researchers discovered that the highest effect for discussion around text was for average and below-average students, indicating that efferent discussion may present an opportunity to close the achievement gap. Good readers benefit from this type of discussion when using a text that is considered difficult for their level. Heterogeneous grouping is beneficial to both high and low achieving students.

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Structure

Simply putting students in pairs or groups is not sufficient for improving comprehension. The type of discussion is very important, and there must be structures in place to stimulate discussion. Simple structures, such as numbered heads and think-pair-share, enhance student participation and accountability and are easily incorporated into the sequence of instruction. There are many other ideas for structures teachers can use to keep students engaged and motivated. Two examples adapted from the book Total Participation Techniques are described below.

Bounce Cards: Students consider the ideas of their peers and share their own idea off of it (develop or expand the idea). Students summarize the information shared by their peers (rephrase) and make comments on specific parts. Students raise inquiry about what their peers share. The teacher should practice modeling a good conversation and the “wrong way” to hold a conversation prior to having students engage in this activity.

Point of View Team Carousel: The teacher creates a prompt that requires students to utilize their judgment and the content presented to take a position; this is recorded on the board so that students can refer to it as they fill in the boxes to the template. Students record their judgment and a rationale for what they believe in the first box. Students then pass their papers to the right, and read and add a supporting rationale that goes along with their peer’s judgment (even if they don’t agree). Students are then asked to pass their papers to the right, and read what is in both of their peers’ boxes and add something that might be used as an opposing rationale (whether they agree with the rationale or not). Students are then asked to pass their papers to the right and add their own opinion, supporting it with their rationale, in the final box. Students are asked to give the papers back to their original owners. Volunteers are called upon to share with the class some of the arguments for and against on their carousel forms. See Point of View Team Carousel below.

<p>1. Give your opinion and explain your rationale. Record your opinion and explain your reason for it.</p>	<p>2. Add a supporting argument. Read your classmate’s response. In this box, add another reason that would support your classmate’s response.</p>
<p>3. Add an opposing argument. In this box, record a reason that might be used to argue <i>against</i> what is written in boxes #1 and #2.</p>	<p>4. Add your “two cents.” Read what is written in the three boxes. Add your <i>opinion</i> and your <i>reason</i> for it in this box.</p>

Adapted from Total Participation Techniques by Himmele & Himmele

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Learning Environment

Successfully involving students in text discussion requires a classroom environment that is supportive and encouraging. Teachers must set guidelines for student behavior regarding differing viewpoints, active listening, and refraining from making negative comments.

Efferent discussions require an efferent stance which involves the **process and goal of extracting information from text. As the manager of an efferent discussion, it is important that the classroom teacher refrain from competing with text as the source of information during the discussion.** Teachers need to remember that the discussion belongs to the students because the work of extracting information from text requires their efforts. It is their learning opportunity. The teacher sets the tone and pattern for discussion by the role that he or she assumes; therefore, the role of the teacher is to remain neutral. Effective contributions that a teacher can make to create an efferent discussion include:

- Leading students back to the text
- Challenging students to support their position or claim about the text
- Asking questions that guide students to question the text or their position/claim about the text

Any comments or body language that teachers display to discourage students from relying on the text as their primary source of information during discussion will derail the text extraction process and goal of an efferent discussion. Teachers need to know specifically what types of things they can say or do to sustain an efferent discussion. Any of the following are appropriate:

- Paraphrasing what they hear students say during discussion that may need clarification for the benefit of the listeners
- Posing a question to the entire group to grapple with an issue that the group may not have yet considered during the course of their discussion
- Pointing out some specific information from texts that are open to various interpretations, followed by a question such as, "What do you think the author was thinking when he/she wrote this?"

Discussion protocols are helpful guidelines for students and teachers to use in the process of conducting discussions. Teachers need to keep in mind the following when determining guidelines for efferent discussions:

- The expectation of the text
- The nature of the discussion
- The type of interactivity required of the participants

The teacher should use the Efferent Discussion Protocol to set expectations for students and use them to redirect conversation that strays from the guidelines. They may also be used to develop rubrics for evaluating student performance during these discussions.

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For further information about conducting text-based discussions:

Supporting and Encouraging Learning Environment

<http://www.uww.edu/learn/diversity/safeclassroom.php>

http://www.safeandrespectful.org/teens/respect_home.html

Active Listening

<http://www.studygs.net/listening.htm>

<http://www.sklatch.net/thoughtlets/listen.html>

Setting Norms

<http://teachersnetwork.org/NTNY/nychelp/mentorship/norms.htm>

<http://www.lawanddemocracy.org/discussionnorms.html>

<http://www.learningforward.org/news/tools/tools8-99rich.cfm>

Evaluation of Discussions

<http://www.lawanddemocracy.org/discussionassess.html>

http://curriculum.org/storage/30/1295412986/scored_discussion.pdf