

DOINGWHATWORKS



Presentation

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Student-Driven Discussions in Social Studies

Saline Middle School, Michigan • February 2009

Topic: Adolescent Literacy

Practice: Engaging Text Discussion

Highlights

- Saline Middle School has adopted a schoolwide approach to teaching reading across the content areas that features explicit instruction and modeling, think alouds to strengthen students' comprehension skills, and opportunities for students to practice text discussion around social studies content.
- The text discussion approach demonstrated by Laurie Erby, seventh-grade social studies teacher, emphasizes a gradual release of responsibility from teacher to student until discussions are totally student-driven.
- Erby selected stories about Chernobyl survivors and modeled a strategy for students to question and reflect on their reading through jotting down marginal notes, questions, and observations.
- Pair-share, small-group discussion, and large-group share-out activities are methods Erby uses to foster student-driven text discussions.
- To extend text discussion and assess student learning in this unit, Erby gave students a partner quiz that required them to collaborate and answer questions together. Then she had students write individual reflections that tied in what they had learned in the textbook, through reading the survivor stories, and during their participation in the pair-sharing and group discussions.

About the Site

Saline Middle School

Saline, MI

Demographics

92% White

4% Asian

2% Hispanic

2% Black

5% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

Saline Middle School is a member of the Washtenaw Intermediate School District (WISD), a regional education service agency in Michigan that has been successful at developing a professional learning community based on the Reading Apprenticeship model and focused on adolescent literacy among its member schools. Saline Middle School demonstrates strength in the areas of explicit instruction in comprehension strategies, the use of text discussion in the content areas, and teaching vocabulary in the context of reading across content areas. Important features for improving reading skills at this site include:

- Teaching reading through the content areas;
- Explicit instruction, teacher modeling, and thinkalouds to strengthen students' comprehension skills;
- Text discussion that uses a gradual release of responsibility until discussions are more student-driven;
- Use of collaborative models such as pair-share, small-group discussions, and large-group share-out methods to enhance text discussion;
- Emphasis on talking-to-the-text and note-marking techniques;
- Use of metacognitive logs during text discussions;
- Vocabulary instruction embedded in all content classrooms; and
- A systemic approach to professional development.

Full Transcript

Presentation Title: Student-Driven Discussions in Social Studies.

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Welcome to Student-Driven Discussions in Social Studies.

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My name is Laurie Erby, and I teach seventh-grade social studies at Saline Middle School.

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It's really important for me in teaching social studies, in particular, to engage students in text discussion because, as many of us know, reading in social studies is not always high-interest reading for students. There's a lot of information in the text, and it's very dense, and so you really need to get them to slow down to really start to understand the concepts that are being talked about in the text.

Slide 4

A simple question-and-answer is great for the kids who are really engaged in that, and usually you have a handful of students whose hands are always up wanting to answer those questions. But the rest of the students in class, quite often knowing that those four or five students are going to answer, will just sit back, and they'll be disengaged. And they're really not getting out of the lesson what you want them to get out of the lesson. But if you have a text discussion, you've got every student involved, and that's so critical for us.

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My goal for this lesson was to really give the students a better feel for what it was like for survivors of Chernobyl. The texts that I used were different survivor stories from Chernobyl. In preparing for a lesson like this, what I'm looking for is text that's differentiated. I have a whole variety of learners in my classroom, all reading at different reading levels, from third grade all the way up through college readers.

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The chapter that we've been working on is on transboundary pollution, and students get a good idea of how one country's pollution can become another country's problem with regard to acid rain, cyanide spill on the Danube, and also Chernobyl. And they do some different activities, which are great to help the kids understand that, but I felt that at the end of the chapter, they really didn't have a feel for the seriousness of these incidents, and in particular Chernobyl.

Slide 7

And so, on the overhead, I was going through and first we looked at—there's a little picture on there of

heroes that were going into Chernobyl afterward to build the tomb that's on there, to put out fires and whatnot. And so, we talked about that and shared our thoughts, and then I went to the text and shared my thoughts and wrote that down, and so they get a picture of what I was doing there and what I was expecting of them.

Slide 8

I do something called Talking to the Text, and so I'll model my thinking actually on the overhead. I'll have a copy of the text on there, and I will be writing down my thoughts. If I'm not sure about a certain word or I want to emphasize a certain word to students, I'll talk to them about how I'm using the context clues, or I'll model that for them. Or if I'm making a connection with something I'm reading to my prior knowledge or some kind of personal connection, or maybe I am kind of getting a visual on my head, I'm visualizing something, I'll share that out loud with students.

Slide 9

Guidelines that I give them are pretty specific. As they're reading, they're jotting down their notes over to the side. They're underlining things, maybe circling words that they don't understand. It's all based on metacognition. If they have questions, you know, "Gee, I really didn't get this," or, you know, later on if they did find their question answered, they'll be revisiting that and answering the question on there. So, their paper is really covered with their thoughts by the time they are done.

Slide 10

Once they have done that, I have them partner pair-share with someone, and they'll discuss what each of them got out of the text, what they understood about the story. If there's a question that they weren't able to answer themselves, hopefully, their partner can help them understand it or they'll share their thoughts, try to figure it out together. It gives them a little more confidence before they share-out with the main group then. So, once the students have a solid understanding of their survivor story, when they're ready to share-out to their discussion group, the discussion group gets together, and each person takes a turn sharing their survivor stories.

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In sharing their stories, they're looking for similarities and differences in their survivor stories, so they're really getting a full feel for what happened to a lot of different people and a lot of different perspectives here. The listeners are going to ask clarifying questions, and then the presenter has a chance to answer

them. So, if they didn't understand something that the presenter mentioned, they can ask, "Gee, what did you mean by this?" or those kinds of questions that were out there.

Slide 12

As far as this lesson, when I am assessing their understanding of it, what I asked them to do was to write a reflection where they tied in what they learned in the textbook along with what they learned in these stories and what they learned in their discussion group, what their understanding was. For a unit like this, I'll have them take a partner quiz. So, instead of assessing each student individually, they'll have to take the quiz together, and they'll have to discuss what the questions in the quiz are asking them and decide how they're going to answer that together. So, it's kind of continuing with the sharing of their thoughts.

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One of the things that I am really starting to notice was that the students who normally would have just kind of skimmed over words that they didn't understand, get to the end, and be okay with the fact that they didn't get it are actually taking the time to try to figure it out. And students who may have just automatically raised their hand and said, "Well, what does this word mean?"—now they really are trying to figure it out themselves using those context clues, using their prior knowledge of the topic that we've been studying, and they are really working themselves to try to figure it out.

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To learn more about Student-Driven Discussions in Social Studies, please explore the additional resources on the Doing What Works' website.