

Minnesota Writing Project

--- Demonstration Lesson ---

Title: Writing Committees: Using small groups and questioning to deepen writing

Grade appropriate: adaptable to 5th grade through College

Approximate Length of time to complete lesson/unit: At least 40 minutes (10 to introduce and a half hour for groups of four to meet. If it is possible, more time will allow for the groups to spend more time on each person's piece.

Learning objectives and significance of lesson:

This lesson gives students a chance to talk through their ideas before they write. This gives "reluctant writers" the chance to realize that they do have something important to say in their writing. They get to speak through it first and get help from their peers in thinking through the directions they might take their piece. In their book Inside Out, Liner, Kirby and Kirby speak of the importance of allowing for students to rehearse their ideas, and this technique helps students do this.

The quiet involved in this lesson also gives the students the chance to slow down and think. More importantly, the focus of three other people, being quiet and listening to one student, helps each student to have a moment to realize the power of their words and to feel truly heard. This is an important way to build community in the classroom and to create a space where students are empowered to help each other and to be significant contributors to the class.

Brief summary/outline:

I used this strategy when we had been part way through a research and writing project. Students knew a lot, but they were having a hard time getting started on the writing. This strategy helped many to jump into the writing.

If students have not had a lot of experience with you in forming open-ended (or divergent) questions, then I recommend starting with Activity 1. If they are experienced in this, you could move to Activity 2.

Activity 1: **Divergent Questioning**

A key part to making this activity successful is helping students to think about what kinds of questions are "open ended" or divergent and how they will help an author to think more through their story than a "closed ended" question will. Researchers have been studying questioning in teaching at least since the 1950s, and they have found since that time that teachers ask more "closed ended" questions than divergent ones, even though research has shown how divergent questions lead to higher order thinking: requiring students to analyze, synthesize and evaluate.

Process:

- Ask participants to think of a gift that meant a lot to them
- Have students come up in pairs and answer questions from cards:
 - Convergent: What color was the gift? How old were you when you got the gift? How big was the gift?
 - Divergent: What about the gift made it meaningful to you? Would the gift have been as important to you if someone else gave it to you? How have your thoughts about the gift changed for you over time?

- Ask participants what they noticed about the effects of the questions (people who were observing and people who were being questioned)

Activity 2: **Writing Committee**

Form the students into groups of four. Give each group a time keeping card ("Wait" on one side, "Speak" on the other) and instruct them to choose a time keeper to help the time out the minutes of quiet. These "thinking" minutes (and they should be full minutes) are important—the questioners should not be writing or doing anything else in that time).

Student Instructions:

You will be explaining what you have so far, and your group will be asking questions to help you "deepen" what you are thinking about.

Procedure:

*One person talks at a time!

1. Writer describes what he/she is thinking of writing.
2. Group waits in silence: Think about what the writer said
3. After a minute or so, each person in the group writes ONE question on their notecard to help the writer deepen what they are thinking about.
4. Group members take turns asking their questions of the writer. Writer can decide to answer the questions but does not have to! Writer can just think about what has been said and make notes on the cards for themselves.
5. Group has a minute of silence to allow the writer to think.
6. Writer and group thank each other and acknowledge what was good and helpful!

Notes: Group members should ONLY ask questions, not give advice! This is hard to do so you will need to help each other!

Related Resources:

This activity is based on a Quaker practice. To read more about it, and why the silence and questions are important, go to <http://www.fgcquaker.org/library/fosteringmeetings/0208.html>

Possible extensions or adaptations for different purposes/student needs:

This could be used when students are in the middle of a project or a piece of writing.

For additional information, contact:

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