Level 3 Humanities - Photos in Focus

PEEL in Practice: 1300 ideas for quality teaching
Dianna McTavish, St Mary's School, Alexandra

During a PEEL two day workshop in January 2005, we were introduced to The Viking Sequence. This was a lesson plan based on a translation task whereby the students turn observations made of a picture into constructive dialogue. This approach interested me as primary age students are generally very eager to immerse themselves in visual images. I left the workshop excited at the prospect that I could use this strategy to naturally engage my Grade 3/4 students while simultaneously teaching interpretative discussion.

As a lead up, I trialled the translation task as an introduction to several special one day themes such as Holocaust Remembrance Day. I gave my students a picture of the fence and lights around Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration camp and asked them what it was. The resulting discussion was interesting to observe as the students had some wonderful if very much unconnected suggestions. As there were not any limitations placed on this discussion (apart from the twenty minute time limit) the children responded instinctively and often without using the conventions of polite group discussion. I loved the discussion for its honesty but realised that without the application of interpretative discussion skills the resulting learning was limited.

At this time we were about to commence a new inquiry unit on salinity. During a family trip to Mildura at Easter 2005 I had taken a photo of the impact of rising saline ground water on agricultural land. The photo contained dead trees, absence of pasture and surface ground water (despite the drought).

During the tuning-in stage of the unit, each student was given a copy of the photo to explore without discussion for five minutes. I then posed the question - What is this photograph of? The student were also told that they had to adhere to polite discussion conventions, should present their interpretations in statements and justify their view and could defend their own statements and comment on other student's statements provided it was undertaken in a constructive manner.

The discussion started very quickly with statements ranging from a battlefield to a swamp. For example, one student stated that the photo was of a battlefield because it looked horrible and dead. She went on to explain that she had seen similar images on the television and we were able to trace this back to the battlefields of the Somme. Another student argued against this line of thought since the photo had a recently graded sandy road in the background. He went on to point out that the roads in a

---

1 A discussion becomes interpretive when the teacher increases wait-time and delays judgement, accepting all answers with equal praise and encouragement. Most class discussions are intended to reach some form of closure to arrive at a "correct" or "best" explanation or view. The students have learned that the teacher will tactfully but efficiently guide the discussion to this predetermined destination; the teacher is looking for responses that will facilitate this journey. In an interpretive discussion, however, the teacher has no immediate intention of reaching closure. Rather, he or she, shows overt interest in establishing and exploring the range of views, opinions and explanations that are held by the students and that are the focus of discussion.
battlefield would be pretty rough if, indeed, there were any at all. All children justified their interpretation in a similar manner and were careful to use specific features in the photo as support. I quickly recorded the statements on the blackboard in order to provide a record of conversation for a reflection at the end of the session.

This unfolding record of discussion also provided several children with a point of reference. They were able to state whom they agreed with and disagreed with by name and the discussion went backwards and forwards from the earlier statements to the latter statements with an ease I had never witnessed before. This visual record of the conversation appeared to help those children who can have difficulty remembering who said what and when it was said. Initially I was hesitant about this since I thought it may have provided an opportunity for children to split into factions according to friendships but my fear proved groundless. All the students were obviously fully engaged in the activity at hand and in their personal responses.

At the end of the 20 minute discussion, the children reflected on the script on the blackboard. They were surprised that most of the discussion revolved around two original statements. Most students were also able to see the value of a conversation that centered on breadth and depth through interpretation, justification and supporting and opposing statements. One child commented on the fact that everyone is usually too busy trying to have their say that no one really thinks about what others are saying. Another student claimed to have appreciated the fact that there were only two interjections for the entire discussion.

Overall I was very pleased on the quality of discussion and will definitely use this strategy again for several reasons. Visual images do engage the children. It is a great way to teach interpretative discussion. It is also a useful way for students to learn about and practise discussion conventions. But most of all, every student was focused and engaged and participated as an equal.

Several days later I asked the children if they thought discussion was learning. I wasn't sure what to expect back but wasn't really surprised to find that half of the grade thought discussion wasn't learning. Over the past three years our school has been part of the 3/4 Literacy Program operated by the Catholic Education Office. This year we are focusing on oral language and one of the concerns emerging from this program is that students do not value discussion as a learning tool such as reading and writing. This concern was also supported by the PoLT (Principles of Learning and Teaching) survey our students took part in. In my grade alone only 6 students rated discussion as useful.

So what has the big picture learning been for me? While I will continue to use translation tasks as a strategy, I also understand that I will have to teach my students the value of discussion. They need to understand that there is a purpose to talk.

Copyright © 2005 Peel Publications