

DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Response Groups: Eliciting Explanations in History

Plainwell Middle School, Michigan • March 2008

Topic: How to Organize Your Teaching

Practice: Higher-Order Questions

Highlights

- Teacher Matt Moorman uses higher-order questions to engage students in complex, critical thinking about important historical concepts.
- Response Groups require students to work cooperatively to analyze, interpret, and discuss controversial topics in history.
- The process of constructing explanations helps students to remember and internalize the information they learn.

About the Site

Plainwell Middle School

Plainwell, MI

Demographics

97% White

1% Black

1% Hispanic

24% Free or Reduced-price Lunch

Plainwell Community Schools began districtwide curricular initiatives in 2005 focused on improving the way teachers organize and deliver instruction. Curriculum restructuring throughout the district impacted the Plainwell Middle School's social studies department in particular through:

- A focus on research-based instructional strategies, including nonlinguistic representations of abstract concepts in vocabulary instruction, higher-order questioning techniques, and frequent review of material
- Adoption of new geography, world history, and U.S. history curriculum aligned with research-based instructional strategies at elementary and middle school grade levels
- Coordination of professional development and model lessons conducted by a lead teacher who received additional training to implement new programs at the middle school level and support adoption of the curriculum at the elementary level

Full Transcript

In order to gain students with—get them involved in higher-order thinking and to move up on Bloom's Taxonomy, we start with really basic concepts that all students can do, and then we just build upon that going deeper and deeper each time. An example of—during our preview activity or an anticipatory set, we're asking students really basic questions that everyone in the class can do because we are asking them simple things, like "what do you see here?" or, "what do you think is happening in this image?" And then as we go through the lesson and the content, we are going to ask more critical thinking questions.

One of the ways that will push that type of thinking is through an activity called the Response Group, in which students are placed in groups of four and will be given historical situation, where they will be debating whether or not the United States should have taken the course of action they did or possibly considering alternative courses of action. One of the lessons we have the students do is they are trying to figure out a way that western farmers could get their crops to market when France has control of the port of New Orleans. So, the students will learn a little bit of information—just enough to make a decision or debate with one another, and then we will give them three choices: a) Should the United States threaten to go to war with France if they don't give us or the United States the Port of New Orleans or 2) should we offer to buy New Orleans from France or, 3) should we offer to buy the entire Louisiana territory and double the size of United States? The students will then, in their groups of four, debate and discuss which course of action is the best for the United States to take. We will then bring it back to whole-group discussion and have each of the different groups in class talk about what they decided and reasons for maybe why choice one would be good or reasons why choice two would be good, reasons why choice three would be good and also some of the negative impacts that those choices can have. And then the students will then go on to find out what actually happened.

I think asking the students to explain their reasoning for coming up with a decision or an idea in history helps them reach the higher-order thinking. It kind of goes back to when we had to show our work in math when we were kids. If you are just letting the students come up with a quick answer, you are kind of letting them off the hook. But if you ask them to explain or give specific examples, you are forcing them to really think through the process, and that's allowing the wheels to turn a little bit more. I believe this helps them remember the material and internalize it for them because you are not just asking them kind of wrote memorization questions that are getting them ready for when they are on Jeopardy someday. They are thinking through this and making a connection to themselves and making it meaningful to themselves, and they own it.