

Teaching Students to Communicate Their Thoughts



With multiple levels of ability within our classrooms, we are often challenged to find activities that meet the needs of all our students while teaching them employability skills. One idea that I have found successful in my classes is to use five-minute "bell-ringer" activities that call for students to identify their cognitive processes.

While I take care of administrative duties, students are required to solve a problem listed on the board or projected on a screen. The question is geared toward an enrichment (rather than remedial) learning continuum. At the end of the allotted time, I randomly call on students of all abilities to give me their answer, right or wrong; more importantly, I ask them to verbally map out their thinking when solving the problem.

When students are encouraged to reflect on and verbalize their thinking, they build communication and problem-solving skills, offer insight to their peers, and detect their own misconceptions. This really has really cut down on sarcastic and critical expressions among classmates because it gives the students opportunities to see how other students are resolving problematic issues. In addition, this type of activity offers me another method of assessment. The more "intelligences" (Howard Gardner) one can incorporate over a period of time, the more effective this activity becomes. For example, one might have students list the steps they take to do a routine activity, such as sharpening a pencil. Once they are done, have them close their eyes and imagine the last time they sharpened their pencil. Instruct them to use each of their senses while they envision the activity. Next, have them create and draw a "sharpen your pencil" icon. Finally, instruct them to develop another list of steps they take for sharpening their pencil. Call on a few students to describe the differences between the two lists and ask them to retrace their thinking from the first list to the last. Why the differences?

Students build communication and problem-solving skills.

Another example is an activity that incorporates higher order math skills. I use problems developed for students on the high end of exceptional needs for students of all abilities so they can model their thinking to one another. This is where the playing field is evened out because all students verbally map out their thought process as well as listen to others do the same. No thought process is invalidated, no thought process is ridiculed.

This teaching strategy does take some time to implement, and the rules of no ridicule must be well enforced. I usually start with simple problems—giving the students about two weeks to get used to reflective practice and then reinforce the procedures as we delve into more complex issues throughout the first semester. This foundational work is well worth the effort. I find that our discussions are more in-depth and ideas flow more freely when the students are respectful of one another's ideas and diverse patterns of thinking.

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In order to maintain a competitive edge in our global society, businesses need critical thinkers who are willing to listen to others and implement change. Identifying and successfully communicating one's thinking to others (as well as listening to and respecting the ideas of peers) are qualities that many businesses today spend valuable training funds trying to achieve. Why not start in our classrooms?

Stefanie Brimacomb is a Graphic and Business teacher at Salmon River High School in Riggins, Idaho. She has a background in business management and banking. She has been teaching at Salmon River High School for five years.

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