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Videotape Commentary

Students struggle when summarizing a text. It’s difficult to know which parts of the story are the most important and how to organize the most important parts—once they’re found—into a meaningful summary. A summary pyramid is a scaffolding tool to help students learn to summarize. In this lesson, students were introduced to a new historical fiction text (Between Shades of Gray by Ruta Sepetys). They listened to the first two chapters of the story, and then they used their story pyramids to summarize what was read. This is an 8th grade Language Arts classroom.

**Describe strategies used to engage students in learning tasks to develop skills & strategies to build their understanding of the specific content:**

Summarizing is not a new concept for this particular class, but it is a concept they need more practice with. I introduced the story pyramid by saying, “This summary pyramid is a good place to start a summary because summarizing can be hard. How do you determine what the most important parts of a story are?”

The text used for this lesson is a historical fiction young-adult novel. The story is about a family from Lithuania who is abducted from their home during the Stalinist purges that occurred during WWII. The historical context of the novel was discussed before the reading.

The text was read aloud and no hard copies were given to the students. This engaged students differently in comprehension than is required for reading the text themselves. Students needed to listen and deconstruct the text at the same time. It made recalling more difficult, but they worked through it.

**Describe strategies for eliciting student thinking and how ongoing responses further their learning:**

Students’ critical thinking was engaged while they listened to the text and also analyzed what was occurring. They knew they would need to summarize the story afterward, so they paid close attention. Some even took notes.

The story pyramid required students to recall information from the story without having the text in front of them. At first I worried this was an ineffective approach because students are used to having a text to scan to help them remember. Reading the text orally, though, required them to use different thinking strategies and stretch their usual thinking to fit this particular situation. I noticed some signs of frustration, but sometimes frustration can be good because that means you’re out of your comfort zone, and that’s where learning occurs.

Students also shared their story pyramids after writing them. This was a chance for everyone to hear what others wrote. It was also a time for reflection on the story, the summaries, and the students’ own writing. I noticed some students adding more to their summaries or changing things they wrote as they listened to what others read.

Also, during the sharing of the summaries, one particular student brought up another book she has read that dealt with the Holocaust. Students were very intrigued by this conversation, and a lively discussion started about Holocaustic writings and diaries written by victims.

**Cite language supports seen in the clip to help students understand content and/or build their academic language skills:**

The historical context of the historical fiction text was set for the students before reading the excerpt. The ability to work across different educational disciplines is necessary for students to be successful throughout their lives. This lesson intertwined history and language arts, two subjects that commonly coexist.

**Explain how the instruction engaged students in developing their abilities to construct meaning from and interpret complex text:**

Students learned a new summary tool they can use when they’re struggling to think of the most important parts of a text they’re reading. During this lesson students needed to engage in critical thinking skills that required them to listen closely, recall, explain, analyze, and create a finished story pyramid to summarize their story. Students were given the spellings of character names and the countries that were written about, but they needed to recall the main events on their own. It took students a few minutes to decide upon the story events to include in their summary pyramids. They asked me questions like, “how do we know what to put for the setting?” or “what events need to be included in the pyramid?” I told them to think about the story and try to recall what was read to them. After a few minutes of digging into the recesses of their short-term memory files, they were ready to write. I was proud of the students for working through their frustrations and staying on task.

**Explain how you supported students’ use of textual references to check their constructions of meaning and interpretations of complex text:**

One student read his story pyramid aloud, and he had a question about the location of the story. He remembered hearing the country Russia mentioned, but he knew the family wasn’t from Russia. (Actually, Stalin was from Russia; the family lived in Lithuania.) I had a brief discussion with him where we talked more about the history behind the story. It was a great teachable moment. Had he had the text handy, he could’ve referred directly to the text to find the country where the family lived. Instead, he had to recall different parts from the story to figure out where the family lived and where Russia interacted with the story being told. His face was very telling when he finally made the connection. It was very much an “ah-hah” moment.

Some students chose to predict the ending of the story instead of writing what happened in the end of the excerpt (we’d only read the first two chapters in class.) This required students to think ahead throughout the story, which is something good readers do frequently.

**Describe how your instruction linked students’ prior learning and experiences with new learning:**

Before even reading the story to students, we discussed the history involved in the text. Students learn about the Holocaust during WWII before 8th grade, but students don’t typically learn about the Stalinist purges that occurred around the same time. I related this new historical information to their previous knowledge about the Holocaust. The situations were very similar in terms of how the victims were treated. Students also started relating the story to other Holocaust books they’ve read or movies they’ve seen.

The summary pyramid was familiar to students because they are often required to summarize a story. The new tool they learned to use was not a new idea to them, just a new approach.

**Reflection of student learning of concepts and academic language—If done over, what might’ve been done to take advantage of missed opportunities or to improve the learning of students with diverse learning needs and characteristics?:**

As I watched the video, I noticed the students are primarily sitting quietly (*very* quietly) at their desks. This isn’t a bad thing, but I wish that I would’ve taken advantage of a few opportunities to engage students in a more lively learning experience. The students’ desks are arranged in clusters which allows for optimal collaboration. Students didn’t collaborate in groups at all, though, during this lesson. I’m wondering if perhaps I asked students to write down the most important events throughout the text while I read, and then they could discuss in groups which parts were most important and why. I feel this would’ve enhanced the lesson.

I also noticed that a select few students dominated the class discussion. I selected students randomly to share their story pyramids, which was good, but I could’ve done a better job of involving all students in the large group discussions. I also could have worked individually with some students. I wish I would’ve sat down with a few different students (or groups of students) to discuss their thought process as they worked. This is something I need to work on in all of my lessons. It’s not enough to walk around the room and tell students to ask questions if they need help. I need to be working with students one-on-one whenever I can to make sure they understand.