22: 8th Social Studies CivilWarOpinion PostInt

Speaker 1: We try to lay it out early. I think we've been laying out from the get-go why we're doing all these things to lead up to this essay and what the essay is for, and I think that will continue to develop as we move through the last little bits of this unit and they're writing their essay. I think what we'll do towards the end, after they've written their essay, is go back. "Okay, what skills did you use here, how you can apply it to the rest of your life, your academic life, hopefully your adult life outside of school."

Speaker 2: It's hard, because like I've said, we've been doing this argument of writing all year, so we have been emphasizing it since the beginning, and our biggest emphasis is that they will use it forever. You're always going to be expected to develop a good argument and back it up with evidence, because if you can't even do that no one is going to want to listen to you. If your point doesn't sound valid, no one is going to care or even want to hear about your opinion, so they might not believe you and you might not convince them, but you'll at least get them to listen to you, and that's the biggest thing that we're trying to advocate to them and for them. No matter what, you're going to use these skills, so it's really important that you focus on them even if they're not the funniest.

Speaker 1: We had a lot of lead up, we've done the claim and evidence before, so I think most of it ... Today, I think the most effective thing we did was we designed a lesson that 80% of the students, 90% of the students could go off and work individually and allow us to work one on one with the students who needed to be pushed a little bit to meet up with everybody else on that common level, so that's probably the most effective part of this lesson. We just developed time for us to work with other students.

Speaker 2: Yeah. For us co-teaching, it just works really well [00:02:00] that my background is more in the English and developing the basic skills, and then he gets to do the content side of it, and he gets to give them all the information they need, and then we can both work individually with our strengths also, play on our strengths, what we can help students with. Having two teachers in the classroom is always awesome. You get all types of learning styles. There's never enough time to work with our students anyways, so the more one-on-one time we can get with them is obviously better.

Speaker 1: We had to make sure that, by this point in starting the writing, the pre-thinking, the pre-writing, that they had enough content development to develop an opinion. We had to basically organize the last four and a half weeks to get to this point, and then basically had to organize the whole year to make sure that they had the skills to use this graphic organizer when we put it in front of them, especially for this being their fourth and final essay. Can they bring it all together and make a quality product at the end? The whole year was organized to get them to this point. This is our last go with the essay. Really looking for as close to perfection as we can so that we can send them off into high school being the highest quality writers.

Speaker 2: Most of our planning is, ideally, backwards planning. We start with where we want our kids to be at, and we just build from there. How are we going to get them here? I find

the easiest thing for us is that we can sit down and bounce that off of each other. Say, like, "Hey, we want them to be able to write this argument essay. What are we going to have to do by the end of each quarter to get them to this point?" Then the other nice part about it is the kids were working on organization. Using graphic organizers is an important skill, and this particular assignment really instills a lot of organization skills in them, because they have to do every step along the way on time, or they get to the end [00:04:00] and they're kind of lost. It also helps them learn how to organize their ideas.

Speaker 1: Definitely. I didn't even think about that. We're building in organizational strategies for them, organizing the writing, organizing their ideas, and I guess that's the point of the graphic organizer, but it's kind of cool to see them using it and them putting their thoughts in a logical order and them doing it this time. We're not spoon feeding it. Maybe we had to hold their hand and kind of guide them along before, now it's all them, and it's kind of cool to see Joe Blow, average student, being able to do this when they came in 6 months ago not being. It's cool to see the growth.

Speaker 2: They use it in their other contents, too. I go to other classrooms with the same students, their language arts class or science class, and getting to see that they are using each of the skills that they're using in all their contents and putting them together, I think cross-curricular is extremely important. The fact that we team teach here, the fact that we have all the same kids as our English teacher and can go over to her and say, "Hey, what did the kids struggle with on their last essay?" And she gives us a lot of stuff that's like, "Hey, these are the three mistakes that I say," and then we do the same with her. We model a lot of good organization for the kids just by the way that we work with each other and how we plan. We don't ever come into a disorganization.

Speaker 1: It keeps kids from slipping through the cracks.

Speaker 2: Yeah.

Speaker 1: I think we catch about as many as we can possibly catch from slipping by.

Speaker 2: Management on these ones, it's always hard. Any time you're going to give students an individual thing that isn't really a desirable activity to work on, it's going to be a little bit difficult, and I am sure that you both saw while you were in here many points where I'm working with individual students and I have to ask the same question multiple times. On these days, it just takes a lot of patience and a lot of questioning and learning how to ask the same [00:06:00] question in eighteen different ways, and yeah. Patience is the biggest one. The already established guidelines, like don't just stand behind me and say, "Ms. Shark, Ms. Shark, Ms. Shark," eighteen times, I promise I'll get there. I think they believe us at this point. We've been helping them all year, we've been backing them up and having high expectations, so they have pretty much settled into that pattern now.

Speaker 1: I think they trust us. I think they know that we want what's best for them, or trying to do what's best for them, and I think that's why, you're talking about management, building that community, building that routine allows us to run this lesson the way we did today, allows us to let them work individually so that we can work one-on-one with those who

need it. If they don't have those norms, if they don't have that routine of, "This is what's expected of me. I know what I'm doing here." If they don't have those skills to go off and run on their own, we can't get to one-on-one because we spend the whole class managing. Like you were saying, it's maybe not the most desirable lesson, because no student wants to go out of the way and write an essay, but I think they're invested in creating a quality product and doing well, so I think it just helps the overall product.

Speaker 2: The relationship building part is the most important, because if they like us, and if they enjoy being with us in our classrooms, then you don't have to manage them. They want to do well for you. Even if it's not something they want to do, they'll do it because there's that mutual respect there, and we treat them like adults and expect them to act like adults, respect each other like co-existing adults, then we get that, because we model it and we also expect it from them every day.

Speaker 1: This was one of those ones that was hard. We weren't quite sure what we were going to get when we started, but it was interesting, because where we found where our first lesson was, [00:08:00] what the holes were, we could build engagement throughout the day. We found, actually, if we had them write it backwards, we could build engagement. What you saw was we did the claim and then went through the evidence and finished with the counterargument, but as we went through the day, what we found was that students produced better if we started with the claim, jumped to the end and did the counterargument, and then back filled the other two pieces of evidence. Making those adjustments, I think, was probably the most valuable thing all day to build engagement. I think that's going to be the most valuable thing.

The hardest thing and the most valuable thing to teaching is just being able to adjust on the fly and make those corrections for what's best for your student. We just noticed that they produced a higher-quality product if we did it in this reverse order and then built that engagement. It wasn't something we had planned, it was just something that we adjusted to that really helped the lesson.

Speaker 2: They thrive on the one-on-one. Even if it's not their favorite thing to do, the writing, they like that they get the individual attention when they do it. They like us to come over and engage with them and talk to them, so the more time that we can build in where we get to talk to them individually is really, really nice. For us as teachers, it makes us do a lot less formal assessing of where they're at, because we can just assess where they're at the whole day. Just be like, "Oh, I can see that everyone in the class seems to be struggling with this one thing in particular."

The less uncertainty you can give them, the better. The management and all of that tends to get a little bit off if you make them feel uncomfortable, feel like they don't know what they're doing. Lots of same question in different ways, lots of patience and sitting down one-on-one with them is what I think has made our classroom easier to manage and organize.

Speaker 1: How do you take this into the real life? How do you use this outside of class? The fact that students are out using graphic organizer, using our way of thinking in other classes,

means that this is becoming relevant to them, becoming [00:10:00] useful to them. Hopefully that just continues, and I'm hoping students are seeing that and seeing the value in these skills that we're giving them, and not just in there, but just how it can apply to their way of thinking and how to develop a thought. I'm hoping it's something they can take with them.

Speaker 2:   Mental level, this age group of kids, it's all about the why. "Why do I have to do it? Why is it important?" The more that you can take the time to explain that to them, the higher the investment is. We try to start every lesson off with explaining why we have to do it, because a lot of them just see school as the checkbox. It's my job to be a student and go to school, but if we can show them how it's going to apply to their lives and how they can take it outside the classroom, we get a lot better results.

A lot of small logistical things like just being flexible. I think the switching the order of which we did things, and also talking about how we front loaded a lot of stuff at the beginning of the class. It was a lot of talking on our behalf for the first 20 minutes, which is almost half our class period, it was more us talking than them talking, and we're always looking to hear them more than we hear ourselves. I think that some more genuine reflection out of them and hearing their answers would have been more productive, and I think that, throughout the day, we got there. Your first lesson of the day is always the hardest.

Speaker 1:   I think this is what I was meaning to tell you, and I hadn't gotten a chance to tell you this yet. I just started changing the way I was wording questions. When we were doing the essay, one thing I struggled with them first period, the one you guys say, was that kids were struggling to grasp the concept of the question, like what are we really digging at here? As the day went on, I realized that if I could narrow it down to, "Here's the two big issues. [00:12:00] Go to Civil War, end slavery, and avoid the Civil War, avoid the cost and keep slavery," if we can narrow it down to those two things, if you can make your choice between those two things, then we can filter out the other pieces of evidence. If they can pick those two big concept items, then we can dive further into content, and I think that was probably the biggest adjustment that I had.

I think what I would change next year is to start that from period one, and maybe even do it as a pre-lesson before. If this is your two big ideas, which one do you find yourself supporting, and then writing it out so that we can take it to this lesson and dive straight into the content.

Speaker 2:   This lesson was definitely not scaffold enough. We expected a little bit too much of them at the beginning, and they got a little bit out of their comfort zone, and then we didn't get the results that we were looking for because of it. Breaking it down into smaller, manageable pieces. The graphic organizer in and of itself is a scaffold to the bigger essay, so sometimes as a teacher you forget that every lesson needs to be scaffolded, too, right? It's not like you can just have one lesson that's one step of it.

Within that lesson, you have to build tiny little pieces that keep them engaged the whole time, and it's really easy to forget, as a teacher, that their attention span is so

much shorter than mine, and they aren't motivated to focus on one activity for more than five to seven minutes. I really think that we just had to break it down a little bit more into more manageable steps instead of expecting so much from them right up front.