

Student Engagement Technique: Silent Discussion

Rationale:

This well-established yet underutilized technique is one of my favorites because it supports critical thinking, active engagement, and social, dialogic learning. From a brain-based education perspective, it also stimulates areas of the brain that oral communication does not, theoretically encouraging the formation of important neural pathways. Finally, it helps build classroom community because it is a communication equalizer, permitting many of the quieter students a stronger voice.

Procedure:

1. Ask each student to write a response to a prompt.
2. Have students form small, circular groups.
3. Ask each student to pass her response to the right and then read and write back to the response that is passed to her.
4. After students have had time to respond, ask them to once again pass their papers to the right so that they each receive a new silent discussion that they will read and respond to. They should be engaging in the whole conversation, not just the original prompt.
5. Continue this process so that each paper is passed two or more cycles around the circle.
6. Allow students to converse in small groups before transitioning to a whole class discussion or concluding the exercise.

Troubleshooting:

- Students initially resist this exercise, but by the end of the discussion, they are usually energetically engaged. I require that the silent part of the discussion be silent (except for moments of appreciative laughter as students view their peers' responses to their ideas). Once learned, it is a simple process, but step-by-step instructions are essential the first time out.

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