OVERVIEW OF THE TEACHING PRACTICE

We often hear “student voice and choice” in connection with project-based learning and other student-centered pedagogies. But student choice is not exactly the same as student voice, so it’s important to know the difference. It’s pretty clear what we mean by choice: it means students can have input into what they learn, how they learn, and what they produce.

Student voice means their ideas are encouraged and welcomed, in a safe and inclusive learning environment. In a classroom with a culture that supports student voice, they aren’t afraid to share their thoughts and offer their opinions.

One aspect of sharing ideas and expressing opinions is the need to back up what you say with evidence. That’s an important critical thinking skill, and it’s a prominent feature of today’s state standards for English Language Arts. It’s also important for citizenship in a democracy.

Teachers can provide scaffolding to help students of all ages learn how to support their ideas with evidence and reasoning. Beginning with simple topics and issues, teachers can provide students with increasingly complex questions to build their “evidence and reasoning muscles.” Teaching this skill, along with creating a supportive environment, will allow students to make their voices heard clearly.

EXPLANATION OF THE ACTIVITY

TITLE: Four Corners Voting
GRADES: K-12
TIME: 15-30 minutes

PURPOSE: To help students use their voice to demonstrate their thinking and support it with evidence.

OVERVIEW

This is a step-by-step process teachers can use to include student voice in a simple way by allowing students to share their opinion and defend it with evidence.

STEPS

1. *Choose a topic with multiple “correct” answers or where students can state their opinion.* Explain to students that they will be sharing their ideas about the topic by making a choice and defending it with evidence. Take some time to demonstrate the meaning of “evidence” and where it can come from (for example, using quotes from text in ELA or using facts from previous lessons in science or social studies).

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2. *Start with a simple example students can relate to.* For example, ask students which ice cream flavor they would prefer: chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, or cookies and cream. Designate a corner of the room for each flavor and ask students to physically move to the corner that represents their choice. Ask for students to defend their choice with specific reasons.

3. *Ask a simple question students can answer easily about the topic.* For example, ask students to choose their favorite character from four choices or the most important event from a historical era. Ask students to move to the corner that represents their choice and demonstrate their choice with evidence. Provide simple corrective feedback and repeat this process until students demonstrate understanding of the topic.

4. *Ask increasingly complex questions where students have to gather evidence from sources in order to defend their choice.* For example, ask students to choose the most important event in a story from several choices or the primary cause of a complex issue in social studies and science. Students can defend their choice with the classmates in their same corner first before defending their choice to the larger group.

5. *Ask students to respond to a final question in writing.* Have the students demonstrate their understanding of the topic and how to defend their reasoning with evidence by writing their final response. Remind students of quality responses they heard throughout the activity as exemplars they can model their answers on.

NOTES

- Depending on student readiness, students may need fewer choices (such as either/or).
- After practicing this activity several times, students may be able to propose their own questions for the class to answer.
- Consider allowing students to change their corner as new evidence is presented. This can be an additional opportunity for students to share their reasoning as they change position.

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