



Diane Titcher Journal

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Building Background Knowledge before Literature Circles

As she conducted a Literature Circle inquiry with her class, Diane kept an informal email journal which she shared with Smokey weekly. To read Diane's journal in its entirety, [click here](#). To read the five excerpts which link directly to the Chapter, read on.

FEBRUARY 17

The vast majority of my kids have virtually no schema about Native Americans (trust me, I'm not exaggerating here). I realized that I have my work cut out for me in terms of building background knowledge before beginning the lit. circle work with the kids. So, I read aloud the story *Cheyenne Again* to the kids while they recorded questions in their reading journals (some of them had 7 or 8 pages of questions!). Next I had them sit down with a partner and look through their questions together. Then I had each student write one before reading question, two during reading questions, and one after reading question on post-it notes and put them on my white board. (Looking over their questions confirmed for me just how little they know about Native Americans.) We gathered as a whole group and I explained to the kids about thin, thick, and profound questions, giving them examples of each type. Then we began looking at the before reading questions, and as a group the kids decided if each question was thin, thick, or profound. They did a really nice job with this. We were also able to answer a few of the questions based on information that was in the text (which gave me an opportunity to point out that finding answers in the text is only one of many good ways readers answer their questions). Then we ran out of time. That was yesterday—today is another snow day (sigh).

FEBRUARY 18

We had yet another snow day and a two-hour delay last week, so I am still struggling to keep up with my plans. However, we did have two very productive days in between all the days off. We started by reviewing what we did with “Cheyenne Again” and then the kids worked with a partner to decide if they thought the during reading and after reading questions they posted on the board were thin, thick, or profound (there were some of each in the group). Then we gathered as a whole class again and discussed how they arrived at their decisions and whether their classmates had a different opinion about any of the questions. We also discussed their questions that were answered in the text.

To help give the kids some background knowledge and begin to make sense of the story (most of them are still thoroughly confused as to what the story is really about), I edited an article about the Carlisle Indian School (to make it a little more



5th grade accessible) and printed copies for each of them. I read the first part of the article together with them, modeling making annotations of our thinking on the overhead. (We've practiced this skill a couple of times before, but it is still new to them. After modeling, I made annotations of *their* thinking on the overhead, as well as mine if I thought they needed to see some higher level thinking than they provided.) Then I had them finish the article with a partner (pairing lower readers with those who could support them). Overall, it went great. The kids were excited to annotate the article I gave them, and I could see light bulbs going on all over the room as they made various connections to the story, "Cheyenne Again". When they finished annotating, I asked them to discuss the article with a partner, comparing their notes, discussing their questions, and sharing their thoughts in general.

When they were done, I launched us into the beginning of our first write around. I was really interested to see how they would do with this as I love the idea for launching conversation when they begin their lit. circles. I began by asking them to write a paragraph in their reading journals about their thoughts and feelings relating to the article, the story, or both. It actually caught me off guard that several of my kids were stumped by that assignment. They couldn't figure out what I wanted them to write, because I specifically told them NOT to summarize the article or story, but rather to share their thinking. After clarifying it several times, in many different ways, even the most reluctant student decided to trust that I really did want her thoughts and opinions, not just what the text said. Of course just as she got to work, the class period ended.

The next day (which was actually 5 days later due to snow days, delays, and a weekend), I asked the kids to review their annotations of the article, and reread their paragraph. A few kids chose to add some new thoughts to their paragraph. Then I put them in groups of 4 (one group of 5) and had them do a silent write around. Their response to this activity was quite positive and the thinking they did on paper was pretty good for a first attempt. My principal looked at a few and thought they were great, but I am actually hoping their thinking will get even more profound as we continue to use this strategy.

After the write around, I planned to let the kids discuss the article and its relationship to "Cheyenne Again" for as long as I felt the conversations were productive. (Yes, I'm admitting that I truly had no idea how long that would be . . . 5 minutes? 30 minutes? My kids are capable of carrying on some pretty hefty conversations without constant supervision, but at the same time, they can easily mislead each other with misinformation, so I knew I would face a challenge in monitoring the conversations and keeping them on the right track.) I was prepared to give them ideas of things to discuss if they were at a loss, including their reactions to their written conversation, their thoughts and feelings about the Carlisle Indian School, and of course, revisiting their questions from "Cheyenne Again"; seeing how many they could answer, as well as evaluating how their overall understanding of the story improved (which it should have, dramatically).

So, following my plans, I had the kids begin an open discussion with their group mates. Most of the groups launched right into productive discussions (yes!) but a couple were looking for more direction . . . “What do you want us to talk about?” In general the groups that asked for more guidance had the less profound written discussion, essentially just agreeing with what everyone wrote before them. However, I was able to point out some differences in their initial paragraphs as a launching point. After probably 5-10 minutes, I went around to each group and asked a couple of more profound questions for them to think about. First, “Do you think Native Americans were ‘civilized’ before the English came to North America?” (They all agreed they were, although in a way different from the English.) Second, “If the Native Americans were civilized (in their own way), why would Richard Pratt start the Carlisle School, take children away from their families, and ‘train’ them to be civilized?” That got some very lively discussions going in all the groups. I let the kids go at it for another 10 minutes or so, and then brought the whole class together to share their thinking with each other in an open conversation. I’m really proud of how good my kids have gotten at carrying on a whole class conversation, without raising their hands, and without looking to me to guide them. I interjected only if there were major misconceptions that needed fixing or they drifted off topic for too long. They had a really good discussion about the article and the last question I posed to them, as well as some of their new thinking and understanding about the book. My next question to them was, “What do you think about what the white settlers did to “help” the Indians adjust to the settlers’ way of life?” asking them to think about the perspectives given in both “Cheyenne Again” and the Carlisle School article. Most of the kids thought it was unfair, although a few argued that the white men were just trying to help make the Indians’ lives better.

Near the end of class, I asked the kids how many of them would be surprised if I told them similar types of things still happen in our world today. About half of them raised their hand. I briefly told them about tribal groups in Africa who still live in “traditional” ways and explained that there are people who believe these tribal people should be brought into “modern society” and “civilized” even if they don’t want to be. I did my best to explain both points of view—that some people believe bringing them into modern society is a gift for them, because they don’t understand how much better their lives can be, while others believe we should leave them alone to live as they choose. I also emphasized that neither point of view is necessarily right or wrong, and they are each entitled to carry their own beliefs and opinions about the issue. They discussed that for a few minutes before the end of class.

I feel terrible that this process is going so much slower than anticipated. I keep debating whether to speed up my lessons and leave out some things to help compensate for the snow days, but then I remind myself that taking the time to build their background knowledge and get comfortable with the various processes we’ll use in the lit. circles will go a long way in helping the lit. circles be productive and worthwhile.

**FEBRUARY 18–29**

Following the write around and ensuing discussions, we went back to the kids questions from Cheyenne again. I had the original partnerships reclaim their questions from my white board to see how many of them they could answer after having read the Carlisle School article. As I suspected, they were able to answer several of them. We came back together as a whole class and I chose some of the questions to discuss. We looked at how the kids were able to answer their questions, and in some cases, they expanded on each others' answers. We also discussed different possible outcomes to their questions:

1. Answered in the text
2. Inferred an answer
3. Answered with the help of an outside source
4. Answered through closer examination of pictures in the text (they felt that should be distinguished from “answered in the text”).
5. Unanswered at this point.

We also discussed how thinking about their questions, even the unanswered ones, helped them to better understand the text.

A NOTE OF MY OWN THINKING HERE:

As we have continued through this process, I have been both very pleased and somewhat frustrated. I've been pleased because I've surprised myself at how many different objectives/standards I have been able to simultaneously cover through these lessons (including the study of questioning as a comprehension strategy, strategies for reading non-fiction text, study of historical fiction, and several social studies standards, including studying early American history and examining primary source documents). I'm a little frustrated because I feel like I'm shortchanging some of those objectives in the interest of keeping the whole process moving (particularly given all the time lost to snow days and special events). In particular, right now I feel like I'm shortchanging the questioning strategy study. I would have liked to devote much more time to examining their questions, the processes they went through to answer them, and how more of them could have been answered by collaborating with their classmates had we had more time. More importantly, I feel like I barely touched on how and why asking questions improves their comprehension, and how their more profound questions can lead to some great thinking about our history and/or world beyond the text. Given that I want them to really be asking those profound questions as they read their lit circle books, and building their inquiry projects off those questions, I'm a little worried that I'm not giving that enough time and focus. I keep thinking, “I'll hit it again, more deeply, with the next round of lessons,” and have been planning for that, but I keep hitting the same time constraints.

BACK TO THE LESSONS:

Last week we moved on to the lessons on Jamestown. Since they briefly studied Jamestown in Social studies earlier this year, I began by having them do a KWL chart in their reading journals. Individually they each came up with a few things they knew, but when we shared them as a class, they assembled a pretty impressive list. Then we made a list of things they wanted to know.

I gave them a packet of materials I had assembled with an article about John Smith, an article with a very brief history of Jamestown, and a primary source document with directions from the Virginia Company to the settlers. I had them read and annotate the two articles on their own. This is the first time I asked them to annotate an entire article individually, having given them several opportunities in the past to do it with various support systems in place (whole class on the overhead, with a small group, with a partner, etc.). I have a few kids who still seem to struggle with getting their thoughts down on paper, so I held an invitational group to help them while the rest of the class worked. I was fortunate to have a couple students who are doing quite well with annotating opt into my group, so they were able to share some of their thinking as a model for their classmates, in addition to my own modeling. Then I had the kids meet with a partner to share their notes and discuss their thinking. I don't think I allowed enough time for this, but once again was faced with the end of the day and wanted to keep things moving the next day.

The next day I asked the kids to write on the back of their packets three new things they learned from reading the two articles and then make a list of questions they had, thinking about things they didn't understand in the articles, things they wondered about that may not have been fully explained, and questions beyond the articles that arose (thinking I would use these to continue our questioning strategy study). We then gathered as a whole class. Students shared what they learned, and then I had each student tell me one of their questions and I compiled a class list. As always, a few interesting discussions took place as students shared.

We then began to tackle the primary source document. I talked to them first about the important role that primary source documents play in helping us understand history and why they would even want to try to understand something that seems like it's written in a foreign language. My kids are somewhat used to me giving them extremely challenging tasks . . . earlier this year I gave them a poem from an 11th grade AP English book and had them tackle that as part of our Monitoring Comprehension strategy study. Of course they didn't know where the poem came from until they had sweated through the process of figuring it out, which they did quite successfully. :-)

I don't know if I am just blessed to have a large number of kids who love a challenge, or if I have somehow created and/or nurtured the love for a challenge in them, but I was thrilled with how hard the kids worked to decipher the document. Of course I had those students who got stuck with the first thought of, "This is too hard," but they were definitely the minority, and I will share more good news about



that in a minute. I started by putting the document on the overhead and reading the first paragraph to the class. There was a loud, collective, “Huh?” when I finished, so I asked if there were any words, phrases or ideas they recognized or thought they could make sense of within that paragraph. I had about half a dozen kids who went right to work, sharing their thoughts on what different parts might mean. The rest of the kids (with one or two exceptions) stayed engaged and watched the main players have at it, occasionally adding their own glimmers of insight. Interestingly enough, after they had pretty much interpreted all the parts they would need to understand the whole paragraph, they were still unable to tell me what the paragraph said. So, I read through the paragraph again, this time substituting their “translations” and guided them to an overall understanding of the paragraph. We repeated this process with the second paragraph, which seemed every so slightly less difficult for them.

At that point, I could tell the kids who weren’t the main contributors were getting bored, so I split the class up into groups of four and put one of each the “leading” kids in a group. My instructions were to continue “decoding” the document in their groups, but the “lead” person in each group was not allowed to do all the thinking. That person needed to work with their classmates to bring out their thinking and then fill in if/when they were really stuck. I was positively thrilled with what took place for the remaining ten minutes of that class period, and probably about 25 minutes of the next. I had really expected some initial whining and comments of, “This is too hard,” or “We don’t get it.” However, with the exception of one group (poorly assembled on my part), they all went right to work, and they really worked to help the kids who were lost in our whole class discussion. I even got lucky with the group that initially balked. When I sat down to work with them, one of the girls in the group (who had said nothing during our whole class discussion) immediately pulled out a couple of phrases she could make sense of. Another student (also a quiet one) added to her thinking, and within a minute or two, they had pieced together the essence of the next few sentences. Of course I made a big deal of how I couldn’t believe how easy that was for them, and shortly after felt confident they could continue on their own. I walked around and watched kids debating their ideas, pouring over dictionaries, and having great revelations. I had also put a map of the Chesapeake Bay in 1607 on the overhead, which resulted in many kids running up to the screen to point out to their group various aspects of their thinking. After observing each group for a few minutes, I briefly interrupted them to gush with praise. We recently added the word “fervent” to our class vocabulary list and I commented to them how pleased I was to see them all working so fervently on figuring out just what this document had to say.

When I felt they were beginning to get weary from the sometimes Herculean efforts they were putting forth, I gathered them back together as a whole class. I put the document up on the overhead again and one paragraph at a time, asked for what they came up with. I made sure that each group contributed something to the discussion and we plowed through the rest of the document, figuring out just what the Virginia Company wanted the settlers to do, and why. The last sentence of the docu-

ment included instructions about not letting Natives settle along the river between Jamestown and the ocean as they would need easy passage to the ocean, and the Natives would be unhappy if they were constantly traveling through their settlements. We talked about how important that one sentence was, as it was really the very beginning of the philosophy that it was okay to tell the Native Americans where they could and couldn't live. It was the beginning of what became many years of forcing Indians to give up their lands to white settlers.

At this point, I took a break from the literacy part of their work and asked them to think about how they felt things were going when they worked in small groups. I started by asking them what was working well. The first response was, "We figured out what the document meant." I asked how and the student said, "By working together and sharing our thinking." (YES!!!! :-)) They also said there were no big conflicts in their groups and they were able to get their work done. When I asked what things were not going well, they were a little reluctant to share, I think because they were worried they might get in trouble. (Of course it hadn't occurred to them that I had been watching them and pretty much already knew what was working and what wasn't.) So I reminded them of previous discussions we'd had about what their responsibilities would be when they were working in their lit. circle groups, and that by discussing problems they were encountering now, we could hopefully solve them and avoid having them once their lit. circle work begins. I rephrased the question to, "What things might go wrong in a small group?" and a good discussion ensued. Here's what they came up with, and their ideas for solving these problems:

1. "A group member tunes out and then falls behind in our discussion or work. Then we have to stop to bring them up to date before we can go on." What I loved about this one (and of course called attention to) was the inclusion of the fact that they actually do stop to help that group member catch up instead of just dismissing them and moving on. Ideas for solving the problem: 1) Understand that it happens to everyone sometimes and just be patient. 2) If it keeps happening with the same person, everyone else keep a closer eye on them and bring them back to attention as soon as you see them tuning out. (This led to a discussion of how you know when someone is tuning out. I LOVED what they came up with.) 3) Actively ask that group member to contribute to the discussion more often.
2. "A group member doesn't get what we're saying or doing, and even though we tried to explain it, they still don't get it." Ideas for solving the problem: 1) Everyone work together to think of different ways to explain the concept(s) or idea(s). 2) Draw sketches or pictures to help them understand. 3) (my personal favorite) Ask the student to explain what they DO understand. That way you can figure out exactly what part they don't get and make it clearer for them. Also, they might realize they understand more than they thought.



3. “The group gets off task.” (Can you guess which group that came from?) Ideas for solving the problem: 1) As soon as someone realizes you’re off task, remind the group to get back on task. 2) Try to pay attention to what things make you get off task. Then when those things come up, shut them down right away.
4. “One group member thinks they have all the right answers and won’t listen when others think their answers are wrong.” Wow—I loved what they came up with for this one. 1) Remind the group member that they are supposed to listen to everyone’s thinking. 2) Ask that group member to support their thinking with evidence from the text or other materials they are using. This could lead to two possible outcomes—the student realizes they can’t really support their thinking and becomes more open to what others have to say; or the other students realize that he/she may have some valid points. 3) Make sure the other group members are supporting their thinking with evidence from the text, which may help the “stubborn” student revise their thinking. Ultimately, they realized (with a little input from me) that having everyone support their thinking could result in totally new thinking somewhere in the middle of the original “opposing” ideas.

Okay, forgive me for gushing here, but isn’t that AWESOME?! Hearing these conversations and watching them work together so well on the primary source document, has me feeling very pumped up about starting the lit. circles and very optimistic about how they will go. I have to add that at the beginning of this year, I was very concerned about the various personalities and “issues” in my class and wondered if I would ever be able to get them to collaborate productively. So hopefully that gives you some insight into my need to pause here and celebrate!

After that discussion, I took out a couple of books I borrowed from our community library on the Powhatan Indians, and shared a few pages I had marked. I explained that while it’s important for them to understand what the settlers did and why, they would also be encountering a lot of unfamiliar Native American concepts in the novels they would be reading, and that I wanted to give them some background information to help with that. I began with a brief story about Pocahontas and John Smith, then went on to briefly discuss the important roles John Smith, Pocahontas, and Chief Powhatan played in the initial peace the settlers had with the Powhatan Indians, and how things quickly deteriorated after all three of them were out of the picture. We then talked about the spiritual beliefs of Native Americans. Last Friday, our school had a Science Expo and my class spent a little time in a star lab. Part of the presentation included a look at some of the Native American constellations, so my kids could immediately connect what I was sharing about Native American spiritual beliefs to what they learned about the constellations. We also read and talked about the Native American “vision quests”. The kids were fascinated by this, which is good because it shows up in several of the novels they have to choose from.

I ended our lesson by looking at a National Geographic interactive website about Jamestown and Werowocomoco. We have computer lab on Friday afternoons, so I showed them the sight and told them they would be exploring it in the lab to learn more about Jamestown and the Powhatan village. I was a little concerned that they would spend a few minutes clicking around and then ask if they could play educational games (a persistent issue in the lab), but once again I was pleasantly surprised. I only had one kid (one of those two who easily gets off task) say he had looked at everything after about 10 minutes and wanted to know what to do. I countered with the fact that it took me over an hour to click on and briefly glance at everything on the sight, and I wanted him to take another look. Then he started hearing the others kids comments about the “cool” things they were finding and got back into it. Other than that, ALL the kids spent over 35 minutes exploring the sight and sharing their findings with each other. Sigh—I love these kids. :-)

MARCH 3–7

We’re making good progress, and with no more snow days in sight, we should actually be choosing books for the lit. circles this Wednesday. (Hurray!) While it feels like all this background knowledge building has taken a painfully long time, the upside is that the kids are really hungry for these books now, and I think our lit. circles are going to get off to a great start.