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1. Lessons shown in video

This section contains two video clips. The first clip shows students reviewing the learning target and success criterion for lesson 1. It continues into the guided notes portion of the lesson and includes a review of previously learned material that is relevant to this unit of instruction (see instructional materials 1.1 and 1.2).

The second video clip is from lesson 2. It picks up just after students have reviewed the learning targets and success criteria. Students are learning the chronology of the French Revolution in an “I do, we do, you do” fashion (see instructional materials 2.1 for learning targets and success criteria and instructional material 2.2 for the material students are working with).

Clip 3 shows informal assessment 1.1 of lesson 1 that separates chunks of instruction.

It should be noted that my mentor teacher was absent during these lessons to attend to a family emergency. A certificated substitute teacher was present for both days.

2. Promoting a positive environment

I demonstrate mutual respect in my interactions with students. I interact with students in a friendly but professional manner to demonstrate that while I care about each student’s learning I expect that they will learn and that their progress in the class depends on their work and not on whether or not I like or dislike them. I am not above using humor when appropriate to make the classroom a more relaxed environment but never at the expense of a student’s dignity. An example of this occurs in clip 1 when at time 4:09 a student who is unfamiliar with the word “clergy” nearly misreads it as “celery”. I use his question to lead in to our discussion of the French estates. When instruction turns to the members of the Second Estate at time 5:55 I good-naturedly refer back to his misreading and clear up the confusion of what the term means.

I also am sure to respect students as people and not just as students. At time 3:25 in clip 1 an assistant principal asks to see a student privately. I speak privately with the student and call her name in a soft voice to inform her of the assistant principal’s presence to avoid calling possibly unwanted attention to her private affairs.

Yet this positive environment is created to facilitate learning. While I have the utmost regard for my students as both learners and people. Praise is offered where appropriate to reinforce success. Incorrect or confused responses are scaffolded so that students may work through newly introduced material on their own and are not humiliated by being incorrect in front of their classmates. This is evident in clip 2 from time 8:19 to 10:20 when a student has trouble enunciating his understanding of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. I point out where he’s correct and fill in the gaps to deepen his understanding rather than simply dismissing an incorrect response.

3. Engaging students in learning

Learning targets are crucial to instruction as they let the students know what the expected outcome of their learning is. Hence a review of learning targets and success criteria form part of the lesson itself. This is evident in clip 1 from the beginning of the clip up to time 3:22. We spend a good deal of time explaining and illuminating the learning target and success criterion. Students rate their understanding of the learning target with a thumbs up or a thumbs down. One student expressed his confusion over the learning target and interpreted it to mean he should already know the

information. This provided me an opportunity to clear up his confusion as well as similar confusions that other students may share but be hesitant to voice.

The blank copy of Instructional Material 1.2 that is distributed to students contains a blank header item on which students record the learning target. (Note: Instructional Material 1.2 included in Task 1 does not contain this header as this version is intended for use by my IEP student. She has already been provided a copy of the learning targets for all the lessons in this sequence for her parents to review per her IEP.)

Numerous informal assessments are also conducted throughout each lesson to monitor student progress toward the learning target. Informal assessment 1.1 is the centerpiece of clip 3. Finally each lesson concludes with an exit ticket in which students rate themselves in their own mastery of the learning target. This exit ticket represents a clear and explicit self-assessment.

Engaging students in analysis

This lesson sequence examines the background, course, and effects of the French Revolution. As students have very little prior familiarity with the French Revolution a good deal of direct instruction was necessary to establish the facts before students were able to practice social studies skills in interpreting and analyzing historical events. Lessons 1 and 2 are designed to give students a thorough grounding in the facts of the Revolution while lesson 3 is designed to exercise social studies skills in analyzing and interpreting facts and building and supporting arguments.

As students learn the background conditions of pre-Revolutionary French society students must interpret how unequal social conditions may spark a revolution. This is precisely what a student is doing from time 2:17 to time 3:26 in clip 3. The student has an impressive but as yet incomplete understanding of the social divisions of the time. I, therefore, provide guidance on how new ideas from the Enlightenment (which the student referenced) helped to raise the consciousness of the Third Estate of itself as a revolutionary force.

Link to prior knowledge and assets

It is difficult for students to engage with some types of historical material unless they can connect it to something that touches them directly or at least touches on issues facing the contemporary United States. Understanding this I try to help students make those connections.

At time 8:20 in clip 2 a student is making struggling to explain his understanding of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and likens it to a constitution. He follows on with a question regarding its legal force. I take this opportunity to deepen both his and the class' understanding of the Declaration of the Rights of Man by likening it to the preamble to the Declaration of Independence, something that students are familiar with through prior study.

Students also make connections to the material on a personal level. At time 1:50 in clip 3 a student can be heard asking "I'm wondering if this is the time when "Les Mis" was." The student is referring to the musical "Les Misérables" which the school drama department is performing and in which this student has a role. This connection to her personal interests helps to deepen her engagement in the content. Her study of the play's setting and characters also establishes a rudimentary background knowledge of the material.

4. Deepen student learning

Some strategies I use to support students' ability to form interpretations include notes that include questions designed to guide students thinking. Lesson 3 is an example of this (see lesson plan and instructional material for lesson 3). The main learning activity of this lesson requires students to analyze primary source documents, draw conclusions and cite textual evidence for their conclusions. The nature of the exercise encourages paired or small group interactions so that students may support each other in forming interpretations and so that I may monitor progress and scaffold where appropriate (Vygotsky).

Question and answer also plays a key role in eliciting student responses. During the informal assessment shown in clip 3 from time 0:48 to time 1:50 the discussion turns from the question of “What was one social condition?” to a deeper discussion of the French estates. Although one student began the discussion, it was soon turned over for the whole class to consider at which point a different student took the question up. The discussion elicited more questions from me to check for understanding. Rather than supplying the information to complete the students’ understanding I allowed the students themselves to work through their understanding using terms that they found comprehensible. Only then would I tie their terms to the formal academic vocabulary.

Support to build arguments

Clip 3 time 2:17 to 3:26 shows a student interpreting a source, in this case his guided chronology of the Revolution. Although the informal assessment shown in this clip is ostensibly a review of the just covered chunk of material, the student takes the opportunity to deepen his own understanding of the implications of factual material, a key social studies skill. I remind the student of the legal force and framework of a constitution and draw a distinction between a legal document and a statement of principles that guides the authors of a legal document. The student thus emerges from his exploration with a stronger foundation for later exploration of the primary source material which will be studied in the following lesson.

5. Analysis of teaching

In reflecting on both my preparation and execution of this lesson sequence I can see several areas where I may improve the learning experience for the students. Many things went quite well, but post-instruction reflection revealed some weaknesses. Chief among these would be classroom arrangement. As it stands elbow pairings work well for some activities, but in some measure it discourages collaboration. The very fact of arrangement in rows demands teacher-centric education giving me more of a “sage on the stage” persona rather than a “guide on the side”. Rearranging the class into table groups for some activities would encourage collaboration and allow students to work through problems with each other rather than relying solely on the teacher for support. Observation of table groups would also give me a better measure of which groups need teacher support and which do not.

As an understanding of French estates is crucial to understanding the social tensions which played a central role in the Revolution I decided to focus on this area through direct instruction in lesson 1. In hindsight I would not launch directly into a discussion of the estates. I would have small groups of students imagine what their lives or their high school community might be like if certain obligations or restrictions were placed on them due to birth. The class could then share their conclusions which we could use as a launching pad for discussion of the estates and refer back to as a point of comparison. This would help to forge a personal connection to an alien social system. It would also give every student an opportunity to make his or her voice heard.

I also might not have spent as much time covering the facts of chronology. As one of the central disciplines of the social sciences is cause and effect, I think it would have benefitted students for a more in depth and thorough exploration of cause and effect. While chronology is indeed important (and any discussion of cause and effect would be meaningless without a clearly established chronology) I might have assigned chronology as homework and opened the lesson with a short review, then had table groups discuss cause and effect from different social science perspectives (e.g. table group A examines cause and effect from a social perspective, table group B from a political perspective, etc.). The class as a whole could then jigsaw different social science perspectives to form a comprehensive picture. In this case assessment would then be modified to focus more on social studies skills like analysis and interpretation rather than mastery of the facts. Such social studies skills relevant to the discipline as a whole and would better serve students in future studies than overly focusing on fact-based content.

Changes for improvement

The first change mentioned in item 5 would benefit students by making the classroom experience more student-centric. It would transform their role from passive recipients to active learners (Marzano). In encouraging collaboration students

would take on more ownership of their own education and would construct knowledge under guidance rather than simply consume knowledge with no schematic framework into which to integrate it (Vygotsky).

The second change I believe would benefit students in making content more immediate by creating a connection with the material under discussion to the social realities of their lives. I believe that this would also help my two ELL students to discuss material in their native language (both speak Spanish as a primary language though they are both highly functioning English speakers as well) if they so choose. This would remove a barrier to learning and allow them to engage with the content on their own level.

The third change I proposed, indeed a theme common to all of these changes, would shift the focus from content based examination to skill based examination. My assessments, both formal and informal, were very thorough in examining content but did not require a great deal of analytic or interpretive skill. Developing social studies skills is essential to any study of history and can be applied to various areas of content. Content is simply the vehicle for practice and development of skills. Yet these skills are not simply limited to social studies and are transferrable across academic disciplines. A focus on skills such as analysis and interpretation or supporting arguments would serve them in other areas of life from analyzing literature in an English class to recognizing the manipulative efforts of advertising.