Silent Discussions: A Collaborative Activity for F2F Text Analysis

This is a perfect activity for working through difficult texts or information. I love it because it allows every voice to be heard, and it gets students moving around the room!

**Requirements:**

1. Reading materials: You’ll have as many student groups as you have *different* reading materials. In other words, if you have four articles, you’ll set up four stations/groups. Reading materials can be articles, poems, primary source documents, visuals such as tables and graphs, anything!)
2. Chart paper
3. *Optional*: writing utensils to differentiate groups-- I gave each group a handful of colored pencils, all the same color. More on this in the description.

Before class, simply tape each document to the center of a piece of chart paper or poster board or any kind of big paper students can write on. These will be the conversation spaces for your students’ silent discussions. Determine whether you want to pre-assign groups or do a quick 1-2-3-4, all the ones over here, all the twos over there sort of grouping.

**Covid-19 consideration:** I always asked that students lean in and read the article in the center of the table, but the past two years, I gave them handouts so that they could read it individually. They still have to be quite close to one another as they work on the chart paper-- the idea being that they are annotating and drawing arrows from the central reading taped on the paper. So I might let them know during the class meeting before this one that they may choose to bring a mask since they’ll be working collaboratively in groups. Just a thought.

**The Activity:** Students will read the given text, then silently discuss it by adding notes to the chart paper. They may draw arrows, they may create their own visuals (I’ve seen students draw T-charts or Venn diagrams to make sense of information from the text). This first round is usually solely for annotation and not as much “conversation.” Once enough time has elapsed-- I always set a timer-- students rotate to the next table. I always encouraged them to chat as they walked since they are asked to be silent during the work. At the new table, the hardest part will be making sure they read the text first, and not the student annotations. Students are, of course, wildly interested in what their peers have to say, but they need to understand the source first! Here, and onward, they will read the text, add their own annotations and/or continue the conversations by offering counterpoints or new ideas to what the previous students’ have written. At the end, you have some pretty incredible visual artifacts of student learning.

**Extension:** Once all tables have been visited, I closed by having students return to their original table and become “expert groups.” I asked that they review the “conversation” that took place on their paper, and gave them time to prepare a summary to share with the class. I always allowed students to take a photo of each final product, or you could take photos and post to Blackboard for students to review.

**Accountability**: I always used this as a formative activity with no grade attached. All the knowledge gained here would be put to work later in student writing, so this needed no grade. That said, you could certainly ask students to initial next to their contributions! Instead of individual accountability, I was focused on groups. Each group had an assigned color of colored pencils, and they carried these with them as they rotated groups. I would remind them throughout: we can see how your group is performing based on your color!

**Learning Environment:** I know that rooms are all different, and it’s not always possible to move desks. Consider taping the chart paper to the wall, even in a hallway! The photos below were after I begged for dry erase tables in my room, but before that, I would do this activity anywhere that it worked! :)

