

DOINGWHATWORKS



Presentation

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Bell Ringers, Pyramids and Big Ideas

Plainwell Middle School, Michigan • May 2008

Topic: How to Organize Your Teaching

Practice: Spacing Learning Over Time

Highlights

- By building frequent review activities into her instruction, this teacher believes she is steadily increasing the number of students who are mastering and retaining the class material.
- Bell ringers, or daily quizzes, are quick ways to review topics and provide students with immediate feedback.
- A structured review of “big ideas” in a unit helps students identify what they know and don’t know by requiring students to compare what they can recall on their own to what’s covered in the textbook.
- Vocabulary games that require students to recall definitions quickly are useful for identifying terms and concepts that need more instruction or practice.

About the Site

Plainwell Middle School

Plainwell, MI

Demographics

97% White

1% African American

1% Hispanic

24% Free or Reduced-price Lunch

Plainwell Community Schools began districtwide curricular initiatives in 2005 focused on improving the way teachers organize and deliver instruction. Curriculum restructuring throughout the district impacted the Plainwell Middle School’s social studies department in particular through:

- A focus on research-based instructional strategies, including nonlinguistic representations of abstract concepts in vocabulary instruction, higher-order questioning techniques, and frequent review of material
- Adoption of new geography, world history, and U.S. history curriculum aligned with research-based instructional strategies at elementary and middle school grade levels
- Coordination of professional development and model lessons conducted by a lead teacher who received additional training to implement new programs at the middle school level and support adoption of the curriculum at the elementary level

Full Transcript

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Welcome to “Bell ringers, pyramids, and big ideas.”

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Hi, my name is Bonny Bowen. I teach social studies to 6th and 8th grade students at Plainwell Middle School in Plainwell, Michigan

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In my opinion, review and helping kids know what they know and what they don’t know—it’s almost a percentage game. I’m trying to get more kids every day to be closer to the real meaning of whatever concept we’re working on, and so by talking about the concept and then refining what they know I think really helps.

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Bell ringers are the very first thing that students do in my classroom. First of all, it's very comforting to them because they know the expectation. I come right in, I look on the board, and there's always going to be some piece that is from the day before, or the week before, or maybe even the month before.

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So it's a review piece. It's some kind of connection to the learning that they've already done, and then we share it as a group each day. I try, when I do bell ringers, to make sure that probably about 60 percent of the kids can do it from instant recall. Because that boosts their confidence, and it lets them know, "I know this already and that's where I'm supposed to be."

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The other 40 percent I expect to go to a source, go to their textbook, or a worksheet, or something we've done which lets them know, "it's okay if you don't know it right now but this is a critical piece in whatever we're learning." The purpose is to connect the learning that they've done from the day before or the week before but only take about five to seven minutes. It's the start of the day to get us ready for learning.

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One of the examples of a bell ringer might be "describe the spoils system of Andrew Jackson." It's critical to understanding his personality and how it was different from presidents before him, and that's what we would talk about. Once we talk about the definition we would compare and contrast him to John Quincy Adams or a president before him.

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Sometimes we use analogies. One that we used today for 6th grade was "oxygen is to humans as ___" and they had to fill in "is to plants." And so the kids just have to fill in the answer and be able to tell the relationship. And that particular bell ringer ties in to our study of the Amazon rainforest and how important it is that the trees are allowed to stay there for the oxygen that the whole world needs.

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When we use the bell ringer, one of the critical parts is that kids are getting immediate feedback, and that's

very important to learning, and that's what makes a bell ringer so effective in the classroom. It's short, it's quick, and once the students have answered and they have shared their answers, I let them know, "yes that's correct" or "no it's not," and we clear up any misunderstandings, so when they move on to whatever else we're going to be doing, they know the right answer or the general definition.

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Sometimes half way through a unit I might do something called "the big idea." They'll take three or four of the big ideas of a unit, and they have to recall on their own what they know about a big idea. And then they'll work with a partner, talking with someone else about the subject that they're learning, and they'll use a different colored pencil, adding to their notes. And that lets them know what they know and what else they probably knew but just someone had to nudge them a little bit. And then they actually go into the textbook and check their answers and see, "are we correct or aren't we?"

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For example, look at a big idea like the voting of the 1820s and how it affected who was elected president in 1828. And so by giving kids a chance to recap on their own, what was the voting of the 1820s? And how did laws change? And who was elected and why? And prompts like that. They would write down what they know, note taking,

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share it with a friend, check it in the book, and then the next day I go over it specifically with them. "Did you have that over a million people voted in 1828, as opposed to a third of that four years earlier? Okay, put a star there. If you don't have it add it. That is a critical part of this big idea." And that affirms that what they're doing is correct. It also adds information if they don't have it, so it fills in the holes when we're reviewing.

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I found through my teaching that games are so important when you're learning vocabulary. The idea behind the game called "a hundred thousand dollar vocabulary pyramid" is kids have to sort out of their eight to ten vocabulary words which are the six most difficult words, and they put them into the pyramid, the hardest being on the top and the less hard ones being at the bottom.

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And the idea is that by one student trying to define each of those words to the other student and the student guessing what the word is, the children find out what they really know about the word and what they don't know. And so it is clarification for me.

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I walk around, and I listen to them give their definitions and their responses. We talk about those words—what was easy to define what was hard to define. And it's also a teaching tool for me because, as I'm walking around, I know the words that they know well,

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and then I also know the words that they're resorting to, "well it's kind of like" or different hints that really don't enhance the understanding of the word. And then I know that I have to incorporate that into my lesson the next day or wherever it would fit in.

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I'm a big believer that if you continue to go over information over time, kids will retain it, and once they figure out that they can retain it like that it really boosts their confidence, and they believe in going back and discussing things that we've already talked about.

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For more information about spacing learning over time, please see the additional materials on the Doing What Works website.