Multiple Intelligence Teaching Strategy

Response Groups

Imagine your students immersed in a lively discussion of what to do about a polluted lake. Students politely take turns, listen to each other, and share opinions. Teachers know that being able to share and understand different points of view is essential in social studies—history, geography, economics, and civics. A wonderful way to cultivate different points of view and inspire critical thinking is through rich class discussion. In many elementary classes, however, in-depth, lively content discussions are rare. Response Groups will help you create such discussions and give your students the skills they need for engaging in and enjoying social studies throughout their school careers.

Begin by putting your students into small, mixed-ability groups. Give the groups a thought-provoking question to discuss and resources to stimulate them—such as photographs, music, simple artifacts, or key information. Soon you’ll be watching your students excitedly gathering ideas from one another. After a few minutes, invite a presenter from each group to share the group’s ideas with the class. You’ll be witness to an entirely new level of interaction as your students respectfully vie with each other to communicate their ideas.

Steps at a Glance

1. Create and move students into Response Groups.
2. Give students resources that inspire critical thinking.
3. Ask provocative critical thinking questions.
4. Allow groups time to prepare their responses.
5. Facilitate a lively class discussion.
**Create and move students into Response Groups.**

The first step for succeeding with Response Groups is to create mixed-ability teams of students that know how to sit together in the correct formation. Here are some quick tips that will get you and your students off to the right start.

1. **Carefully form groups before the activity begins.** Try to put students with a variety of abilities in each group. For example, if the activity will involve drawing and writing, make sure each group has members with strong artistic and linguistic skills. If the topic explores cultural or gender issues, reflect ethnic or gender diversity within the groups.

2. **Before they move into groups, remind your students of the rules for creating a cooperative, tolerant classroom environment:**
   - Treat everyone, including the teacher, with respect.
   - Use kind words and actions toward others.
   - Do everything you can to help yourself and others learn.
   (The process of establishing these rules is discussed in Part 2, “Creating a Cooperative, Tolerant Classroom.”)

3. **Create a clever and efficient way for students to move into groups that are carefully arranged so that students can easily talk to one another.** If the activity will involve a displayed image, make sure everyone will be able to see it. You might use a transparency, small marks on the floor, a dry-erase board, or a flannel board to show students which group they are in and where the group will gather.

4. **Have students practice moving into Response Groups.** In lower-elementary classes, they will quickly move from their desks to sit with their groups on the floor with their knees touching. In upper-elementary classes, moving into groups may involve rearranging some furniture. You might conduct a “Desk Olympics” to teach students to move desks quickly and safely. (The Desk Olympics is explained in Part 2 of this book.) Also, consider asking three volunteers to model how to quickly get into a group. Challenge them to discover ways to move into a group without touching each other or making any sounds. They may come up with very useful suggestions—such as putting the desks around them in the correct formation before they move into their groups, gesturing politely to indicate who should go where, and being considerate (including bowing to each other!) as they race around the classroom to get into formation.

5. **Wait to begin the activity until all groups are arranged precisely.** This sends a clear message: exact group configuration is important.
**STEP 2**

**Give students resources that inspire critical thinking.**

Imagine yourself in a heated discussion about an unusual news event, controversial song lyrics, or an intriguing human dilemma. The passion you feel at such moments is what every social studies teacher hopes to create during class discussions of geography, history, civics, and economics. The first step to fostering such lively discussions among your students is to give them something exciting to talk about.

Choosing the right resources for students to discuss during Response Group activities requires a keen sense of what excites students. Lower-elementary students are often intrigued with simple moral dilemmas. You could show a photograph of a child tossing a soda can into the bushes and have students debate which of these responses would be best: (A) Ignore it. (B) Pick it up yourself. (C) Tell her to pick it up. Lower-elementary students also love guessing games. To teach a history lesson, you might put students into Response Groups and project images of school objects from the 1800s (such as a coal-burning stove, an oil-burning lamp, and a slate) and have them guess the function of each object.

Upper-elementary students can be given resources that challenge them to resolve historical dilemmas, understand multiple perspectives, or categorize abstract ideas. For example, you might show a dramatic photograph of children playing in an impoverished area of Chicago in 1890 and ask students to describe what they would do to improve life back then. Or you might give students primary resources detailing the dilemmas West Africans faced during the slave trade and ask them how they might have responded.

*Social Studies Alive!* lessons use a variety of resource types—compelling images, music, photographs of artifacts, readings—to stimulate Response Group discussions. You can easily find additional resources in your own school. Consider video clips, information from the Internet, library books, magazines, and audio recordings. Before using a particular resource with your students, however, ask yourself these basic questions:

- Will my students understand the resource?
- Will they be interested in the resource?
- Is there anything controversial, enigmatic, or dramatic about the resource that will prompt heated discussion?
- Am I interested in the resource?
**STEP 3**

**Ask provocative critical thinking questions.**

Now that you’ve assembled your students into groups and given them some stimulating resources, it’s time to carefully craft a question, or a group of questions, that will lead to true critical thinking.

Before you begin composing questions, recall Jerome Bruner’s theory of the spiral curriculum. He suggests that when students are taught basic concepts first and then progressively more difficult ones, all learners can engage in higher-order thinking. This notion is often overlooked in the elementary classroom. Students might be asked high-level questions before most of them have adequate preparatory knowledge to answer effectively. As a result, discussions often end up involving only a handful of students.

To ensure success in Response Group discussions, think carefully about how to fashion open-ended questions that leave a lot of room for discussion. Here are a few examples:

- This is an object from a classroom of long ago. How might it have been used?
- Suppose you found yourself living on this island. How would you survive? How would you use the natural resources for food, clothing, and shelter?
- With your group, list foods from as many different cultures as you can.
- Which of these artifacts do you think were created by Native Americans living in the Northwest region of the United States?

For some questions, you might offer several choices and ask that groups support their answers:

- A new girl has come to our school. What’s the best way to respond?
  A. Stare at her.
  B. Wait for the teacher to introduce her.
  C. Smile and say hello.
- Pretend you are an enslaved African. How would you respond to the inhumane conditions of the Middle Passage? Why?
  A. I would refuse to eat and would resist any help from the slave traders or other captured Africans.
  B. I would try to organize a revolt by the captive Africans against the slave traders, even though I would probably get killed.
  C. I would try to maintain my strength and survive the voyage.

This illustration could be used to inspire lower-elementary students to think critically about how humans use the elements in their environment for survival. They could be shown this image and then asked the following: *Picture yourself as having been left in this mountainous place, where there are no other people, houses, or stores. Work with your group to figure out how you could survive. How would you use the natural resources in this place for food, clothing, and shelter?*

“The children talk about these issues for days to follow.”
Allow groups time to prepare their responses.

Once you have given students stimulating resources and carefully crafted critical thinking questions, small-group discussion can begin. (At the lower-elementary level, you will need to read the critical thinking questions aloud.) In their groups, students have time to talk about, refine, and (at the upper-elementary level) write answers to the critical thinking questions. They will soon be prepared to confidently share surprisingly sophisticated ideas with the class.

Follow these guidelines to inspire animated, purposeful small-group discussions:

1. **Assign and rotate the role of presenter.** At the beginning of a Response Group activity, assign the role of presenter to one member of each group. (Students might be familiar with other terms for presenter, such as group speaker or discussion leader.) Explain that this student will act as the group’s leader while the group is working together, making sure all members share their ideas, and will share the group’s findings with the class. Rotate the role of presenter for each critical thinking question.

2. **Have presenters remember their groups’ ideas.** Remind presenters that they will have to remember the key ideas their groups talked about. At the upper-elementary level, provide groups with a handout that lists each critical thinking question or set of questions. Challenge groups to record key ideas to share during the class discussion.

3. **Give groups adequate time to discuss the critical thinking questions.** Lower-elementary students will need one to three minutes to discuss each question; upper-elementary students will need three to five minutes. Circulate through the room to monitor group discussion. If a group struggles, approach them and ask some additional probing questions. Then challenge them to answer your questions on their own.

4. **Ask groups to use a variety of ways, not just verbal, to share their answers with the class.** For example, you might have groups present a short skit, use their bodies to create a human statue, or sing a rap song that expresses their answer.
Facilitate a lively class discussion.

After groups have had adequate time to contemplate and discuss a critical thinking question or group of questions, students will be ready for class discussion. By this time, your students should have plenty of ideas they are willing to share. The challenge is to facilitate the discussion so that the different points of view are brought forth in a lively, engaging, and civil fashion.

First, ask presenters to follow these guidelines:
- When called on to present for your group, stand up and face the class.
- State your name and which group you are speaking for.
- Start your response by saying, “[Name], my group respectfully agrees/disagrees with your group because….”
- Speak loudly and clearly.

To begin class discussion, ask presenters from two or three groups to share their answers. This will likely offer the class a range of views on the question. To further inspire rich discussion, try these tips:
- Ask whether any presenters have ideas that are dramatically different from those already stated.
- Allow two presenters with very different opinions to argue their points.
- Ask a presenter who has not yet spoken to consider the ideas already mentioned and explain which point he or she most agrees or disagrees with.
- If the discussion brings forth only one point of view, promote deeper discussion by acting incredulous and arguing the unheard perspective.
- Challenge students to support their answers with examples and facts.

As the activity unfolds, expect more thoughtful and longer responses from presenters than you have experienced during more traditional class discussions. Lower-elementary presenters should be able to respond from 10 to 20 seconds, upper-elementary presenters for 30 seconds or more. If a few presenters seem to dominate the discussion, be sure to call on a different group’s presenter for the next critical thinking question.

Lively discussion ensues after students have had time to prepare answers with their group members.

“The students were tentative at first with the discussion process, but soon they were off and running, leaving me to stand back and enjoy their thoughts and words. And they now see that everyone in the class has something to contribute.”