

Big Paper: Building a Silent Conversation

Source: Facing History

Available at: <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/big-paper-silent-conversation>

Rationale

This discussion strategy uses writing and silence as tools to help students explore a topic in depth. In a Big Paper discussion, students write out their responses to a stimulus, such as a quotation or historical document. This process slows down students' thinking and gives them an opportunity to focus on the views of others. It also creates a visual record of students' thoughts and questions that you can refer to later in a course. You can use this strategy both to engage students who are not as likely to participate in a verbal discussion and to help make sure that students who are eager to talk and listen carefully to the ideas of their classmates. After they participate in this activity several times, students' comfort, confidence, and skill in using this method increases.

Procedure

1. Select a Stimulus for Discussion

First, you will need to select the “stimulus”—the material that students will respond to. A stimulus might consist of questions, quotations, historical documents, excerpts from novels, poetry, or images. Groups can all be given the same stimulus for discussion, but more often they are each given a different text related to the same theme. This activity works best when students are working in pairs or triads. Each group also needs a sheet of big poster paper that can fit a written conversation and added comments. In the middle of each of these, tape or write the “stimulus” (image, quotation, excerpt, etc.) that will be used to spark the students' discussion.

2. Prepare Students

Inform the class that this activity will be completed in silence. All communication is done in writing. Students should be told that they will have time to speak in pairs and in the large groups later. Go over all of the instructions at the beginning so that they do not ask questions during the activity. Also, before the activity starts, the teacher should ask students if they have questions, to minimize the chance that students will interrupt the silence once it has begun. You can also remind students of their task as they begin each new step.

3. Students Comment on Their Group's Big Paper

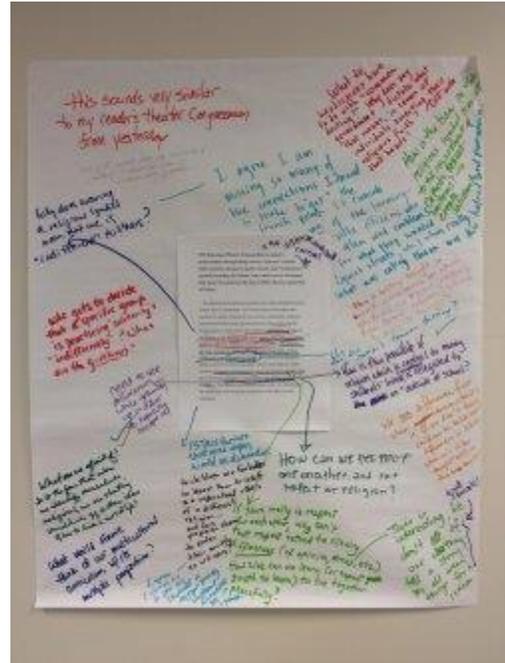
Each group receives a Big Paper and each student gets a marker or pen. Some teachers have each student use a different color to make it easier to see the back-and-forth flow of a conversation. The groups read the text (or look at the image) in silence. After students have read, they are to comment on the text and ask questions of each other in writing on the Big Paper. The written conversation must start on the topic of the text but can stray wherever the students take it. If someone in the group writes a question, another member of the group should address the question by writing on the Big Paper. Students can draw lines connecting a comment to a particular question. Make sure students know that more than one of them can write on the Big Paper at the same time. The teacher can determine the length of this step, but it should be at least 15 minutes.

4. **Students Comment on Other Groups' Big Papers**

Still working in silence, students leave their groups and walk around reading the other Big Papers. Students bring their marker or pen with them and can write comments or further questions for thought on other Big Papers. Again, you can determine the length of time for this step based on the number of Big Papers and your knowledge of the students.

5. **Students Return to Their Group's Big Paper Silence is broken.**

The groups reassemble back at their own Big Paper. They should look at any new comments written by others. Now they can have a free verbal conversation about the text, their own comments, what they read on other papers, and the comments their fellow students wrote for them. At this point, you might ask students to take out their journals and identify a question or comment that stands out to them.



6. **Discuss as a Class**

Finally, debrief the process with the large group. The conversation can begin with a simple prompt such as, “What did you learn from doing this activity?” This is the time to delve deeper into the content and use ideas on the Big Papers to draw out students' thoughts. The discussion can also touch upon the importance and difficulty of staying silent and students' level of comfort with this activity.

Variations

- **Little Paper:** With a Little Paper activity, the “stimulus” (question, excerpt, quotation, etc.) is placed in the center of a regular-sized piece of paper. Often, teachers select four to five different “stimuli” and create groups of the same size. Each student begins by commenting on the “stimulus” on his/her Little Paper. After a few minutes, each paper is passed to the student on the left (or right). This process is repeated until all students have had the opportunity to comment on every paper. All of this is done in silence, just like the Big Paper activity. Then students review the Little Paper they had first, noticing comments made by their peers. Finally, small groups have a discussion about the questions and ideas that stand out to them from this exercise.
- **Gallery Walk:** The Big Paper activity can also be structured as a [Gallery Walk](#). In this arrangement, Big Papers are taped to the walls or placed on tables, and students comment on the Big Papers in silence, at their own pace. Sometimes teachers assign students, often in pairs or triads, to a particular Big Paper and then have them switch to the next one after five or ten minutes.