

Text-on-Text, or Collaborative Annotation

Strategy 14

- Time: 20 minutes
- Grouping Sequence: whole class, groups of 3, whole class

We learned this rarely used strategy from teacher Sheila Newell in Houston, Texas. It is a powerful variant of the preceding strategy, Written Discussion. Here, groups of three kids gather around one large-print copy of a text, annotate it with individually colored markers, and write comments about each other's comments in the margin. Then, the groups join in a gallery walk (see Strategy 19), where they read and write about the ideas generated by other groups.

Like other forms of written conversation, text-on-text balances airtime, getting all group members involved in discussions. The shy kids cannot hide and the bloviators cannot dominate when the conversation is happening silently, in writing, and everyone gets the same amount of time to write. And later, once each student has built up a body of writing about a topic, all the kids usually have enough confidence to speak up when the discussion goes out-loud.

MATERIALS NEEDED

One article copy for every three students, enlarged as much as possible and pasted onto a large sheet of chart paper; several sets of different colored markers; Post-it notes or clipboards for gallery walk.

Steps and Teaching Language

STEP 1 Prepare the lesson First you need to choose and prepare the text. Identify a very short selection (say a hundred words) that is relevant to kids *and* highly debatable, even inflammatory. The one we have provided, about teenage dishonesty, always evokes a range of comments from students—outrage, defensiveness, what-else-is-new, and even a little lying, just like on the survey itself.

Notice that our article appears in large type. Whatever text you use, blow up the font as big as you can get it on an 8½ × 11-inch sheet of paper. You are doing this because several kids will be reading from the same page. Make about ten copies of the article—one for every three students. Paste each article onto a big piece of chart or butcher paper (you may have to visit your local elementary school to retrieve this item). What you are doing is creating a huge margin around the text that kids can write in, using the colored markers.

STEP 2 Get kids physically set up

Today we are going to have a small-group discussion about a very short article. We've done that plenty of times before, right? But this time we are going to read the article silently on copies I have put on these posters. See? You'll get in groups of three, and push your desks together, and then put the poster on top. You'll want to sit or stand in a kind of U-shape around the poster. Let's try it.

Have one group of kids go through this process, moving their desks (or tables), placing the poster, and positioning themselves around it where they can easily read. Then let everyone else follow suit.



Students working on a text-on-text poster

STEP 3 Show an example and assign colored markers Show kids our example of a completed text-on-text poster on the next page, or display one from a previous group of your own students. Leave this up throughout the lesson so kids can get a feel for what these writings look like.

When we have a written discussion on the posters, we need to keep track of who said what, so you each need to pick a different colored marker. Got that? Now, at the bottom of your chart, make a key that shows who's using what color. Remember what a "key" is, from our study of maps? Reserve one color for yourself—we prefer purple—for joining in written conversations later on.

Ready?



Independence
Stands out to me America is based on it.

If there is any true cause of fear respecting independence, it is because no plan is yet laid down. Men do not see their way out... Let the assemblies be annual with a President only. The representation more equal... Their business wholly domestic and subject to the authority of a Continental Congress...

A government of our own is our natural right; to form a constitution of our own in a cool, deliberate manner, while we have it in our power, than to trust such an event to time and chance. Ye that oppose independence now, ye know not what ye do; ye are opening a door to eternal tyranny, by keeping vacant the seat of government.

O ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only tyranny, but the tyrant stand forth! Freedom hath been hunted around the globe. O receive the fugitive and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.

No, asylum like a safe place or a hiding place. That's what asylums were supposed to be for sick people!

The King of England is the tyrant, right?

Yes, I think so. This sure gets you pretty mad about the King and what a bad guy he is.

Handwritten annotations:
 - So Congress only meets once a year? (circled)
 - Yep! They don't do much. meeting all year!
 - They are in the middle of making the big decision as in "we have the power to lead the country and we won't back down!"
 - Yeah, like we have a chance we should take it!
 - I think Thomas Paine is saying that we should have a president rather than a King and make people more equal.
 - Right, just like they said in the Declaration of independence.
 - Don't be a chicken do the right thing!
 - WHAT?
 - Who is the fugitive?
 - Freedom maybe is a fugitive because it is never safe or stable anywhere because of bad governments.
 - Like America is a mental hospital!
 - Everyone should stand up for what they want!
 - They want freedom all around the world.
 - So they can't make war on other countries? We could do that?
 - Maybe the Continental Congress can do that?

Text-on-text exercise using Tom Paine's *Common Sense*

STEP 4 Read aloud Now, introduce the article and read it aloud, slowly and dramatically, to really highlight the contents and issues.

STEP 5 Offer instructions

All right. You are now invited to reread the article and write your comments, reactions, feelings, questions, and connections in the margin. Feel free to underline or circle parts of the text, and use an arrow out into the margin to expand on what you are talking about. You can mark parts up with annotation codes, drawings or diagrams, anything that helps you put your thinking out there and get a conversation going.

Remember, three of you will be writing on the same page. So what are you going to do if two people are trying to circle the same word at the same time? Let kids offer suggestions. Right, be polite, take turns, share space in the margins, don't shove anybody's hand around.

As you guys finish annotating the text for yourself, you should start reading what other people have written, what parts they've marked, what comments they have made, what questions they have asked. And write back to them, right in that margin: share your thoughts, answer their questions if you can—just have a conversation on the page.

You will probably have to repeat this instruction later, as kids are trying to remember what to do next.

There are four rules when we do this:

- 1. Use your best handwriting; people have to be able to read what you write.*
- 2. Use all the time I give you for writing. Don't just write a word or two and quit. Keep rereading and thinking about the article and the other kids' posts—just keep that conversation going.*
- 3. This is a silent discussion, so no talking until later on!*
- 4. Have fun!*

STEP 6 Monitor and coach Now with your purple pen in hand, circulate, confer, and look for helpful examples. If kids are hovering over the text and writing, they are doing fine. Look for groups where kids have leaned back or stopped writing. Enter that group silently and read what kids have written so far. Using your teacher-color pen, write a good, meaty question in the margin to help them restart their discussion, and then move on. Come back a few minutes later to see if kids are on track. Allow plenty of time for this stage; if the activity is new to kids, you'll be doing a fair amount of coaching.

STEP 7 Gallery walk Next, have groups hang their posters up, spaced evenly around the room, and invite them to take a gallery walk (see Strategy 19). Be sure kids bring a clipboard or other writing surface so they can make notes on the similarities and differences among the charted conversations (three or four responses per poster is plenty). Or, supply them with Post-it notes, which they can use to leave comments on other groups' posters.

STEP 8 Share Now, reconvene the whole class and talk about what people noticed as they studied other kids' work, how ideas and interpretations developed, and what positions or themes emerged.

Tips and Variations

- **IT'S WORTH THE TIME** This lesson is admittedly a bit of work to set up, but it can really spark thinking and conversation. With kids up and out of their seats, engaging with each other and with ideas, this activity opens some space for those students who crave the physical energy of movement, or who need a different way of representing their ideas in order to join in the thinking.
- **MODELS HELP** The first time you try text-on-text with your kids, be sure to save copies of some well-done posters so you can use them as models for succeeding classes. It's always best to show kids what "the thing" is supposed to look like when it's done, whatever thing you are asking them to produce.
- **INVITE DRAWING** When Smokey taught this lesson to English language learners in a rural New Mexico high school, many kids were initially reticent to write notes on the poster. But once he told them that drawing "counted," they loosened right up. For many kids, the chance to begin with a quick drawing or cartoon can open the door to writing. And, by the way, this is not "lowering standards." You can offer tons of meaning in a drawing, especially when you start adding labels, captions, and talk and thought balloons—exactly what we encourage kids to do.