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Inquiry

The literacy unit that I taught to my 4th and 5th grade class was a unit about tall tales. The 'I Can' statement for my three focus students was 'I can recognize the elements of various texts, such as tall tales.' I chose this statement as the core focus of the unit because, although the students were also reading and writing tall tales, they were doing so in groups. However, the majority of the work the class did focusing on identifying, defining, and recognizing tall tale elements was done independently.

The three students that were my focus students for this unit all surprised me in some way during the unit. Student A is at a medium-high academic level, but has behavior problems. She has trouble getting along with other students in the class when in group settings and has said disrespectful things to teachers throughout the year. I chose to focus on her because I knew this unit would emphasize a group setting so I wanted to see how she would behave within the group and if her academic achievement would be effected by such a set up. Student B is a low academic student who is extremely quiet. He never volunteers answers in any subject in class, but he is usually doing the work. I chose him because of his high effort level regardless of low grades. I also chose him to see how he was different from my third focus student, student C. She is also a low academic student who is also an ESL student, but she rarely puts in much effort. She will write down nonsense words just to get the work done quickly and she is constantly misbehaving and talking when she is not supposed to be. It is a constant struggle each day to get student C to put much effort into anything.

My pre-assessment of these three students turned up some unexpected results. Student A got 1 answer correct out of 6 questions and received a D, which was a surprisingly low grade for her. Student B got 4 answers out 6 correct and earned a C, which was actually higher than he usually gets. Student C answered 1 question out of 6 correct and received a D, which was a typical grade for her. This showed me that regardless of the level, these students needed to be introduced to the elements of a tall tale. It also provided me with the idea that the students may not have had any practice with elements of any genre of story before.

In looking at the scores of the whole class, it seemed that the class struggled with the pre-assessment of this unit. The pre-assessment was a matching worksheet which had the five elements listed and their five definitions in the incorrect order. The sixth question asked students if tall tales were fiction or non-fiction stories and to circle one of those choices. The class has had experience with matching worksheets before and was given the instructions verbally and written. 11 of the 27 students received A's, or 6 out of 6 correct, on the pre-assessment. This was encouraging to see. 10 of the 11 students who received A's were 5th graders. In creating our split class, we were given many high-academic 5th graders. Not all of the 5th graders are high-academic students, but at least half of them are. There were three students who received B's, which was 5 out of 6 correct. There were six students who received C's, which was 4 out of 6 correct. Finally, there were seven students who earned D's, which was 0, 1, 2, or 3 out of 6 correct. It is possible that the 5th graders did so well because they have already worked with story elements previously, whereas 4th graders have not yet done so. Many students in both grades did get the question about whether tall tales are fiction or non-fiction correct. This could be because when preparing for the MEAP test earlier this year, our class had to identify the differences and read both types of stories.

The goal of this unit was to teach students five characteristics of tall tales, and how to recognize them when reading a tall tale. It was important that students understand what makes tall tales different from fairy tales, fantasy stories, and science fiction, since they all have similarities. The first step in the unit was to see what students already knew by having them complete a pre-assessment. This helped me to see that the class, especially the 4th grade

students, would need continuous review of the elements, and help learning how to recognize them within a tall tale. I started off the unit by telling the class about all of the exciting technology we would be using to create a tall tale in the form of a digital story to help engage their interest. The elements focused on in the unit were exaggeration, plot, setting, heroic character, and conflict/resolution. Over the course of the first week, I read tall tales to the students and would think-aloud while I read about where I thought a tall tale element might be. I gradually stopped pointing out these elements and asked students to do that for me. Students gained independent practice finding tall tale elements in the tall tale *Paul Bunyan*. The students created a flip book to write the definitions of each element and also to give an example of that definition within *Paul Bunyan*. They were able to draw or write their example to help appeal to visual learners.

Once the flip books were complete, the students viewed a model digital story that I created retelling the tall tale *Johnny Appleseed*. The students were put in groups and given movie job roles. The possible job roles were Director, Director of Photography, Screenwriter, Storyboard Artist, or DJ. Time was spent explaining each job duty and modeling how to create a digital story step by step. Within their groups, students made their practice digital story using technological equipment that I received from a grant from Michigan State University for one month. Each group was assigned five pages of Steven Kellogg's book *Paul Bunyan* to turn into a digital story, which required using digital cameras and laptop computers. These were used for the groups to record their voices, set up scenes, create graphic organizers, take pictures, and add music and sound effects.

Once each group finished creating their digital stories of their assigned five pages, their stories were combined to make one complete digital story. For the next portion of the unit, students were given different job roles based on surveys they filled out about how each group member did and which job role they preferred. For this digital story, students used Kidspiration software to create a story web and an outline of the tall tale that their group decided to write. These graphic organizers had to include all five elements of tall tales to help ensure that their story was a tall tale. Students used their graphic organizers to write out their tall tale story using a word processer. A similar process was used by students to make this digital story as before, only they had to take 8-15 pictures and had much longer digital stories. The unit was completed with a celebration movie premiere during which the students and their parents were able to watch the class's tall tales.

From observing my students throughout the unit, I have learned many things about how this unit went. First, I learned that the main goal of this unit, which was for students to be able to define and identify elements of tall tales, was extremely successful. On the post-assessment, 25 of 27 students received an A or a B versus only 14 of 27 students receiving an A or a B on the pre-assessment, showing a 41% improvement. The many activities that the students did throughout this unit that immersed them in using the elements of tall tales was likely the reason for the high jump in grades from pre-assessment to post-assessment.

One of the biggest challenges of the unit for the majority of students was in understanding the element of exaggeration, especially when writing their tall tale stories. When it became clear that the students had misconceptions about what exaggeration was, the class was given greater amounts of instruction using real life examples of exaggeration and contrasting them to examples of fantasy and science fiction. Another challenge was that the time required to model each step of how to use the new technology and still include the objectives of the lesson took double the amount of time that was expected, through no fault of the students. Modeling and having prepared examples were essential to the success of this unit. None of my students had experience with creating digital stories or using laptops before, so it was extremely important that they did not feel that the project was more than they could handle.

The few challenges were worth the trouble because I saw my students do some of the best work I have seen from them all year with this unit. Students who typically talk during

lessons or do not pay attention were often the ones who were the most excited about the unit. I learned that these students just needed to be given a different type of activity than they are used to. Also, I put students who are generally disruptive or low-academic students in job roles that required the most leadership. The majority of those students really did phenomenal being leaders within their group and showed that they could handle demanding roles. Each student completed their role within their group and most did more than was required of their role. I believe that this unit was so successful because it was something that none of the students had done before, and it enabled the students to use technology like laptops and digital cameras to create a movie all by themselves. The constant activity that the project required appealed to everyone in the class.

My three focus students also showed me a different side to them during this unit. On the pre-assessment, Student A received a D, however, on the post-assessment, she received an A. Since she is a medium-high academic level student, it is not surprising that she did so well once she learned what the elements were. What was surprising was how significantly her attitude changed during this unit. She was given the role of director of photography, which required teamwork and leadership. There was no lack of either of those from Student A. She was constantly working with her group to make sure that they all got to use the camera and even taught other groups how to use it if they had questions. She also helped a student in her group who is special education certified in reading with his reading parts as many times as he needed. Student A's group members all gave her the highest rating of a 5 on a 1-5 rating scale, which rated how well each group member participated in the group and completed their duties. One group member noted that "she let everyone take pictures" on the rating sheet. This student has shown that she understands the objective of the unit and changed her attitude and behavior issues completely for the better. This positive behavior has carried over all day long in every subject, with only one or two minor exceptions.

Student B also surprised me during this unit, but in a less positive way. While Student B is a low-academic level student, he has always shown great effort in everything he does. During this unit, I began to see his effort start to dwindle. Some days he would participate well with his group and work hard on drawing the storyboard, which was his role. Other days, I would find him sitting away from his group drawing pictures or with his head down. His group had constant problems, which likely affected how much effort he decided to put into the project. After talks with his group and assigning each person with something specific to do, he would do it. If this student was not given a specific direction by me though, he would just sit with his head down while the rest of his group worked on writing the tall tale. I think this may have occurred because he does not think that he is a strong writer, so he may have not wanted to have any part in the writing. I did notice that on days when the group was doing active things, like taking pictures, he was much more involved. On the pre-assessment, this student answered 4 out of 6 questions correct, earning him a C. On the post-assessment he received the exact same score. He spent a great amount of time filling out the post-assessment and not as much time with the pre-assessment. This makes me think that he may have guessed on the pre-assessment and put thought into the post-assessment. This student rated himself as a 4 for participation in the group on a 1-5 scale, which shows that he knows he was not giving his best effort. One group member commented on the rating scale about student B that, "He sits down and do nothing." This helped to give me insight into how student B learns. He needs some specific directions to get started at something, and struggles with group work when the task is challenging to him.

Student C did a wonderful job with this unit and as a teacher, made me extremely proud. On the pre-assessment, this student answered 1 out of 6 questions correctly, and on the post-assessment, she received a B, or 5 out of 6. She rarely sees B's as grades, so I was happy to see her do so well. This student was given the role of director and her misbehavior and low participation level in the class completely changed. She worked intensely almost all of the time and often asked to stay in at recess to keep working on her project.

Furthermore, during most class discussions, she almost never participates, but when reviewing tall tale elements for this unit, she raised her hand every time. It seems that the hands-on element and use of technology portions of this unit appealed to this student greatly. There was one day when student C and another student were running around the room, for which they had to sit out from working on the project for the rest of the lesson. This student was so upset that she would not get to continue working on the project that day that she cried, which is extremely out of character for her. This showed me how important this project is to her. Student C is often judged harshly by her peers because she gets people around her in trouble because of how frequently she talks and gets others to talk. Her classmates showed that they saw how hard she was working on the evaluation form throughout this unit though. She received all 5's from her group members on a scale of 1-5 of how well she participated in the group and completed her duties. One student commented that Student C, "did awesome at her job," and another said that "she works hard." These are comments that this student does not frequently hear when it comes to academic work, so it was great to see how motivated she was to participate during this unit.

This unit was extremely motivating for the majority of the class, and the whole class showed me that they can handle such an intense activity. From their impressive digital story tall tales, the students made it clear that they can handle intensive, technological projects, and walk away with an in-depth knowledge of the topics being taught.