Megan Stephens
Dr. Shilling
EDUC 352

Impact on Student Learning Experience

I taught a lesson about “Civil Disobedience” by Henry David Thoreau. The piece is a short persuasive essay about Thoreau’s night in jail for refusing to pay taxes. The students were working on a unit about Transcendentalism, so they had some background as far as the time period and other writers during the time period. They did not know what civil disobedience was, however, even though they had come into contact with the phrase before. I taught two regular English 11 classes, 2nd period and 9th period. In 2nd period, there were 22 Caucasian students, two with Individualized Education Plans and two Foreign Exchange students. In 9th period, there were 24 Caucasian students, 3 with Individualized Education Plans and one Foreign Exchange student. This was the regular English, so there were not any high ability students, but there was a significant range among the students’ reading levels, as I saw beforehand based off of their Accelerated Reader data.

The lesson went well overall. I feel that the students walked away with deep knowledge of the material. The reading was rather tedious, but I broke it up by paragraph and discussed the important concepts of the reading as we went along. We read the essay through ‘Shared Reading,’ highlighted by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey in *Improving Adolescent Literacy*. For both classes, I read the two longer paragraphs and asked the students to read the rest. It was a collaborative effort, which I think helped the lesson flow. As Fisher and Frey (2012) claim, “There is a lesson specifically related to a comprehension strategy, text feature, or reading behavior” (61). I think my lesson incorporated all three of the things that Fisher and Frey
highlight. Their objective was to identify at least two main points of each paragraph of the persuasive essay, which they knew beforehand as they were given a worksheet to fill out as the class did the reading. Both classes were able to meet this objective, since they all completed the worksheet, which I graded myself after the lesson was taught.

I was surprised by how much better the lesson went the second time around. The students in the 9th period class, who overall do not generally do as well as the students in the 2nd period class, seemed to grasp the material better, and were more apt to come to conclusions on their own. I believe I was more comfortable by 9th period, and I knew what to expect, which I think also contributed to their learning. I created the lesson to keep the students engaged by having them fill out a worksheet of the reading as we went along. The students had to pay attention in order to complete it, so I feel that they were actively involved in the goal of the lesson. For about half of the reading, the students themselves were able to identify the main points. The rest of the time I would explain the paragraph to them and they would have to pick out from what I said what they thought was most important. In this way I think the students were able to think critically.

The level of student participation was rather low, but the majority of the lesson was reading, and I believe the students simply do not feel comfortable reading aloud in front of the class. There was also low participation as far as answering questions regarding the important concepts of the essay, especially in 2nd period. If I had the choice to not read the entire essay I would have gone that route, but I understand that it is important for the students to read it all for comprehension purposes. The 2nd period class had less participation than the 9th period class, but I was more prepared to handle this by 9th period, so that could be why 9th period participated more. By 9th period, I had decided to tell the students the questions I would be asking before the...
reading so that they had more time to come up with answers, which proved to be beneficial because there was more participation that way. In 2nd period, a couple of the higher ability (or at least higher reading ability) students volunteered to read multiple paragraphs, but I did end up calling on a few students to read. By 9th period, when I realized that the students were not volunteering, I found that it was easier to read aloud myself, but I made a compromise with the students, telling them that I would read but I wanted them to be prepared to answer the questions and identify the important concepts. This strategy flowed much smoother, and the students identified the important concepts on their own, which was at the heart of the lesson. I felt good about this because I could tell that 9th period was able to grasp the main ideas.

The lesson was difficult to scaffold instruction for. Most of the differentiating I did while grading the papers. The Foreign Exchange students and the students with Individualized Education Plans were able to do the work that everyone else was doing. They did not participate in the class discussion, but they actively listened to others because they completed the worksheet and their scores reflected that they learned the objective of the lesson. I did not call on these students to read aloud, and I made sure to give enough time for everyone to complete each section of the worksheet as we went along.

The pretest/posttest data showed an improvement in the student’s comprehension of Thoreau’s ideas of civil disobedience. For the pretest, the students had to answer two questions relating to “Civil Disobedience.” For the posttest, the students answered these questions again on their worksheet which they had to answer after the reading, along with two more evaluation type questions relating to these. There was dramatic improvement from the first set of scores to the second, which is evidence of student learning. I actually taught the students two days after this lesson about Ghandi’s “On Civil Disobedience,” and I assumed that they already knew what civil
disobedience was from the pretest/posttest data. From their one page essays they wrote about Ghandi, I was able to deduce that they did indeed grasp the concept of civil disobedience. I used Thoreau’s essay to activate their prior knowledge, which seemed to help them be able to think more critically about Ghandi’s essay.
Sources