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Strategies for Reading Comprehension

Carousel Brainstorm

[recommended by Susan Rubel of Connecticut]



What Is a Carousel Brainstorm?

Whether activating background knowledge or checking understanding after studying a topic, a carousel brainstorm allows you to have students pull out and think about what they know about subtopics within a larger topic.

How Does It Work?

Begin by putting students in groups of 3 or 4. Give each group a sheet of newsprint/chart paper. Each group's sheet has a different subtopic written on it. One student serves as the recorder and has a particular color of magic marker. Explain that the students will have a short time (say, 30 seconds) to write down on their chart paper all the terms they can think of that they associate with their topic. Explain upfront that you will then have them pass their sheet over to the next group, and a new topic will be passed to them. Make it clear which direction you'll have them pass the sheets so that this is orderly AND so that each group will receive each of the subtopic sheets. At the end of the 30 seconds, tell them to cap their markers, remind them to keep their markers, but have them pass their sheets to the next group according to the pre-determined path for passing. After three or four passings, you will probably want to extend the writing time to 40 seconds, then 45 seconds, and perhaps up to a minute, because all the easy ideas will have been taken by previous groups, and the students will need more time to talk about and think of other terms to be added to the brainstorm list. Keep having students brainstorm, write, and pass until each group has had a chance to add ideas to each of the subtopic sheets. Let them pass it the final time to the group who had each sheet first.

The first time I saw this strategy used was actually in an 8th grade science class. The topic was the Circulatory System, and students had read the textbook chapter on it the night before. The teacher began the day with Carousel Brainstorming. The individual chart paper sheets were labeled with subtopics relevant to the Circulatory System: Heart, Lungs, Capillaries, Arteries, Veins, Exchange of Gases, and so on.

Isn't This Like "Graffiti?"

Yep, almost exactly like it, but the difference is that with Graffiti, the sheets are posted on the wall, and the students move around from sheet to sheet. With Carousel Brainstorming, the students stay seated and the sheets are passed. Otherwise, it's hard to tell the difference.

How Might I Push It a Step Further?

I like to go beyond the simple brainstorm and have the group who started with the sheet look it over when it returns to them, note all the other ideas that were added after it was passed around to the other groups, and then circle the three terms that they think are most essential, most important, or most fundamental to the topic at the top of their sheet. That way, they spend some time critically evaluating all the possible terms and topics and making decisions about which are most representative of or most closely associated with the given topic. Sometimes, students do this quickly or almost glibly, but often the groups will spend quite a while hashing this out. That tells me that they are really thinking about it. Then, I'll have them try to write a definition for their topic, a statement that explains to someone who is unfamiliar with it what that topic is really about. I tell them that since they have already circled three terms that they consider essential or fundamental to their topic, they'll probably want to USE those three terms in their definition, or be darned sure to consider them for inclusion in their definition. While this has the limitation of having students think deeply about only ONE of the subtopics (the sheet they have before them, not all the other subtopics on the other sheets), I still find great value in the depth of thinking and conversation as we take the strategy this much further.



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