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What Are They Thinking

My final unit is on the Civil War. More specifically my unit focuses on Virginia’s involvement in the Civil War. Therefore, I asked eight of my fourth grade students “What do you know about the Civil War?” In order to document the concept of the “Civil War,” I asked my students to create a web. In the center was of course the concept “Civil War.” Branching out of the web I asked them to draw or write anything they knew about the Civil War. Furthermore, on the back on this paper, I asked my students to indicate whether the state of Virginia was part of the Union army, or the Confederate army. After they completed their webs, I sat these students down and had a conversation with them asking them to elaborate on what they put on their webs as well as asking some probing questions to get a better understanding of their Civil War knowledge as I begin to prepare my final unit.

Even from just looking at their webs, I was fascinated by what their pictures, words and phrases revealed about their knowledge of the Civil War. Here are just a few of the phrases I read:

-“Abraham was the president during the war”

-“people who fought for freedom, brave people”

-A Civil War has guns, knives, and attack dogs”

-“lots of people were in the war”

-“it was civil”

-“they used the closet house as a hospital”

Most of my students wrote or drew a picture of Abraham Lincoln (and they actually looked like him). There were also several American flags and guns drawn on their paper. Words like “union” and “confederate” peppered only a few of my students work where as Abraham Lincoln was on almost every one.

The question I asked the students to answer on the back of their paper, “Was Virginia part of the Union or the Confederate” brought varying answers. Four of my students said Virginia was part of the Confederate army, three of my students said that Virginia was part of the Union army, and 1 student was unsure. I learned from this question alone that this is an aspect of the Civil War I need to make clear in my unit. After I spoke with my students, I am going to apply our conversations to my unit by ensuring that my daily lessons on causes, battles, people, results then, and lasting results of the Civil War all clearly discuss the role that Virginia played as a member of the Confederate army. I will make sure my language includes this vocabulary and that my assessments focus on understanding the two sides of the war.

When we came together, I facilitated an open discussion with the students to talk about where they came up with the different elements they put on their web. During this conversation, I “learned” a lot about Abraham Lincoln. According to my students, Abraham Lincoln was the president. He wore a top hat and was on the north team, which is the team that won. He also freed the slaves. Someone chimed in and said that the north is also called the union. Another student said that after the war, Booth Will killed him in Fords Theater. Then someone said no it was John Booth. They went back and forth, all 8 of them and actually were able to come up with John Wilks Booth. . . or maybe it was John Will Booth. I told the students that I was very impressed at how much they knew about Abraham Lincoln and asked them where they learned about him. They said in second grade they studied famous Americans and he was one of them. I said that is excellent, and asked if the leader of the south was also a famous American. They said no. So I asked them if they could tell me anything they knew about the leader of the south. One student said “It’s some John Hankey person” followed by a “No, you mean John Kennedy, yeah, he led the south”. One student said that George Washington fought in the south while another student chimed in saying, “Right cause he was a Virginian and Virginia was in the south”. The same student who knew that the north was known as the Union also knew that the southerners were called Confederates. This conversation was eye opening and solidified that I wanted to elaborate a lesson of my unit for famous people in the Civil War, especially famous Virginians. I plan to do this lesson in a think-tac-toe format, which will provide me with an assessment as well. It is great that they know so much about Abraham Lincoln, but their skewed perspective on the leaders of the south is something that I would like my unit to address.

After our conversation about the leaders in the Civil War, I asked my students to discuss the two sides of the Civil War. I told them that from our conversation I learned that there is a north and that there is a south, but who was on what side. One of my students said, “Oh, well it was the Southwest Virginians vs. the Northern Virginians.” Another student chimed in and said, “Yes, because Virginia was in between because most wanted to be in the north with no slaves, but some of Virginia wanted to be in the South with the slaves, which is why we have West Virginia.” It was so interesting to hear them talk about this amongst themselves. These students seem to have quite a bit of knowledge about the Civil War, but some of it tends to be misplaced or only understood half way. They know that a major cause of the war was slavery. They understand that Abraham Lincoln led the north and that the northerns won the war. However, there is confusion as to who fought on what side, and what was Virginia’s role. They also have a hard time understanding the time in history. For instance, one boy said that his uncle was in the Civil War. Another said that they used swords on horses and spies in hot air balloons. I hope to use my lesson on famous battles in Virginia to overcome these misconceptions by including the weapons used during the battles as well as the dates in the battles.

During this part of the conversation I tried to draw out where their ideas about the war had come from. Some students said T.V, others said their parents and their older brothers and sisters. Others said that they picked up pieces here and there in school such as in 2nd grade when they were learning about famous Americans they learned about the Civil War because of Abraham Lincoln. Learning where my student’s ideas came from was very interesting, and it made me realize the importance that the Civil War has in schools, family, and the media. Therefore, I even though for the SOL standards, I need to focus on Virginia’s involvement in the Civil War, I want to make sure my students still have an unbiased and complete look at the war.

Conducting my “What Are They Thinking” activity with my students made me realize a lot of different things about my student’s understanding of the Civil War. It has given me a lot of direction for my individual lessons and has helped me solidify the elements I want to include and pay close attention to in those lessons. The five lessons I have chosen to conduct are: Causes of the Civil War and where Virginia stood, famous Civil War battles in Virginia, famous Virginians who fought during the Civil War, Results of the Civil War and what it meant for the state of Virginia, and lasting results of the Civil War seen in Virginia today. I’m very excited about my unit, but I’m also concerned that I have bit off more than I can chew. These five lessons can easily take five weeks. However, I am excited to use the conversations I had with my students to help write out a Unit map and outline my lessons.