

Save the Last Word for Me

Think back on various point-counterpoint news programs that you have watched. Sometimes you witness a verbal free-for-all, with a news correspondent desperately mediating between two or more individuals who have diverging viewpoints they are eager to express. Each wants to capture air time to tell you, the public, what “it really means.” And each wants the last word.

Wouldn't it be refreshing if your students also wanted the last word about what they are learning in class? Instead, only a handful of students venture thoughts about what they found interesting in class reading assignments. The rest of the class is often hard-pressed to verbalize “what the reading really means” to them.

For many students, *reading* means taking a quick, superficial trip through a text for the sole purpose of answering assigned questions. Unfortunately, these students often never achieve more than a cursory, literal idea of what they have read. Classroom discussions that encourage students to think about their reading tend to sputter as a result, because students do not engage in reflective reading behavior.

Activities that stimulate students to reflect on what they read help to develop active and thoughtful readers. One effective strategy for developing readers who are thinkers is Save the Last Word for Me (Burke & Harste, described in Vaughan & Estes, 1986). Save the Last Word prompts students to actively engage with the text and provides a cooperative group format for the subsequent class discussion.

Using the Strategy

Save the Last Word for Me (see page 122) is an excellent strategy to use with material that may elicit differing opinions or multiple interpretations. This discussion format is controlled by the students rather than directed by the teacher. The small-group setting is more inviting to students who are reluctant to talk in front of an entire class, and in addition, gives them time to rehearse their comments by writing their thoughts on index cards. Using the strategy involves the following steps:

1 Assign a story, selection, or passage to be read. Have students locate five statements that they find

interesting or would like to comment on—statements with which they agree or disagree or that contradict something they thought they knew. They could be statements that particularly surprised, excited, or intrigued them. When reading literature, students also could select revealing statements or actions made by characters in a story. Have students place a light pencil mark next to their five chosen statements.

2 Distribute five index cards to each student, a card for each selected statement. Have students write one statement on the front side of a card. On the reverse side, have them write comments about the statement. For example, a student reading a selection about wolves as an endangered species might select the following statement for the front of a card: “Wolves are sometimes illegally shot by ranchers who fear that their livestock will be attacked.” On the reverse side, the student may write the following comment: “Ranchers ought to have a right to protect their animals from dangerous predators like wolves.”

3 Divide the class into small groups of four or five members. All students in each group share one of their five statements with other group members. The first student reads a statement to the group and helps members locate the statement in the text. However, the student is not allowed to make any comments on the statement until the other members of the group give their reactions or responses. In effect, the student gets “the last word” in the discussion of the statement. For example, a student might share the following statement: “Wolves naturally try to avoid contact with humans.” But the student does not discuss her comments—that people's fears of wolves

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Source:

Buehl, D. (2001). *Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning*, 2nd ed. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

are exaggerated, especially because of the way wolves are treated in fairy tales—until other group members have commented about the statement. The attitude during this phase is: Here is a statement that interested me. You tell me what you think, and then I will tell you what I think.

4 Have students continue the process until everyone in the group has shared one statement and has provided the “last word” in the discussion. Begin another round with students sharing another of their cards.

Advantages

- Students are given an opportunity to adopt a more reflective stance as they read.
- Students are encouraged to talk about things in the reading that they personally connect to, and they all have an opportunity to participate in the class discussion on the reading.
- Students are able to hear classmates’ views before offering their own, which gives them the chance to adjust their comments and reflect on ideas before expressing them to others.

This strategy is adaptable to most subject areas and is appropriate for elementary through high school level students.

SAVE THE LAST WORD FOR ME

1. As you read, make a check mark (✓) in pencil next to five statements that you
 - agree with,
 - disagree with,
 - have heard of before,
 - found interesting, or
 - want to say something about.
2. After you finish reading, write each statement on the front of a separate index card.
3. On the back of each card, write the comment you would like to share with your group about each statement.
4. When you meet in your group
 - a. select a group member to go first;
 - b. the selected member reads the statement from the front of one of his or her cards, but is not allowed to make any comment;
 - c. all other group member talk about the statement and makes comments;
 - d. when everyone is done commenting, the member who wrote the statement makes comments; and
 - e. a second group member is selected, and the process is repeated until all cards are shared.

Reference

Vaughan, J., & Estes, T. (1986). *Reading and reasoning beyond the primary grades*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.