

Reproducible 4: Big Paper - Building a Silent Conversation

In this discussion strategy, students will:

- Slow down their own thinking process to let them consider the views of others
- Be encouraged to explore a topic/issue in an in-depth manner
- Honor silence in the classroom
- Create a visual record of their thoughts and emotions

MATERIALS:

Several pieces of flip chart paper

Markers or pens

Tape

In this strategy the idea is to have students, in pairs, have a conversation in writing around a document or image.

Examples for Big Paper activities in a Facing History and Ourselves classroom may include:

- A text or visual image that reflects some difficult aspect of the September 11th events
- A particularly moving testimony from a survivor
- A speech by a politician
- A speech or statement from the Taliban, a controversial op-ed piece or quote
- A political cartoon
- A piece of art
- A journal or diary entry
- A series of quotes from students themselves

The document chosen should be pasted or taped to the middle of a big sheet of flip chart paper or newsprint. This leaves plenty of room for students to write on the “Big Paper.” This activity works best when each pair has the same text, but it could work well if pairs have different texts as well. The students should be told that all the writing they do on the Big Paper will be seen by other students.

Step One: Importance of Silence

Before this activity occurs, it must be made clear that for the first two parts of this process, there is to be absolute silence. All communication is done in writing. Students should be told that they will have time to speak in pairs and in the large groups later. Also, before the activity starts, the teacher should ask students if they have questions, to minimize the chance that students will interrupt the silence once it has begun.

Step Two:

Each pair receives a Big Paper and each student a marker or pen. The pairs are to read the text (or look at the image) in silence. After both students in each pair have read, they are to comment on the text, and ask questions of each other in writing on the Big Paper. The written conversation must start on the text but can stray to wherever the students take it. The teacher can determine the length of this step, but it should be at least 15 minutes.

Step Three:

Still working in silence, the students leave their partner and walk around reading the other Big Papers. Students bring their marker or pen with them and can write comments or further questions for thought on other Big Papers. Again, the teacher can determine the length of time for this step based on the number of Big Papers and his/her knowledge of the students.

Step Four:

Silence is broken. The pairs regroup back at their own Big Paper. They should look at any comments written by others. Now they can have a free, verbal conversation about the text, their own comments, what they read on other papers, and comments their fellow students wrote back to them.

Step Five:

The teacher should debrief the process with the large group. The discussion can touch upon the importance and difficulty of staying silent, the mode of communication, and the level of comfort with this activity. This is the time to delve deeper into the content. The teacher can use the prompts on the Big Papers to bring out the students' thoughts.