Task 3 - Reflection K. Harris

The Building Academic Discussion Skills course was quite interesting for me to observe human nature (or the nature of human eighth graders, I suppose). The students were asked to prepare for a discussion, and know what a conversation/discussion is. Yet when they began this task, rather than being prepared for a discussion or conversation about the topic, they all prepared speeches, almost presentations. They were shocked that we were having an "actual conversation," as recorded in my video sample.

I have seen students trust their ideas more since doing this, and I hope to see it continue to bloom as the days pass. It hasn't been quite long enough for me to truly see the fruits of my labor, and I will need to do this again soon (as indicated by their surveys) to continue building this skill in them. The student that gave the most dynamic and from-his-own-thoughts comment was a student that is usually considered to be... less-than-studious. His comment was thoughtful and honest and received applause. So, on the same day as the exercise, I saw a definite development of the skill, right in front of my eyes.

Students in my classes that seem to be painfully shy remain that way... yet their survey responses say otherwise. I expected many more responses of "this was terrible, please don't do it again," especially due to the number of times that I am met with silence when I ask questions that I feel like they KNOW or at least HAVE to have an opinion about. So it must've sparked something, and it is possible that I won't ever see them bloom into great debaters while they are still in eighth grade, but something that we do this year creates the spark that is fanned later on in their schooling, and they grow into fiery orators.

I had a student that was part of a group in my first period that was SO shy, he refused to participate at all. He then sent me an email that afternoon, apologizing and saying that he would never do that again. I was thankful for his message and proud that he sent it. I told him that middle school is the perfect time to mess up, because it is a time to learn and grow into the people we are meant to be. I said, "I hope that you will learn from the experience, and perhaps, in the future, when you're involved in a presentation in college or at work and you're feeling nervous, you'll remember this and know that not doing it feels worse than the fear you feel about speaking in front of people and you'll go for it--and it will have been worth it!"

One of the accommodations I made to ensure their success during this discussion was something that I have done from the beginning - cultivated a classroom environment where they know that "scientists learn the most when they are wrong!" and that no one is going to throw anything at them if they are wrong when they speak up in class. They have a harder time extending that grace to each other, but, again, that is something that has to be learned and matured into over the years.

Another thing that I did to help accommodate students who are super shy or with disabilities was to create the research document. I gave it to all students, but I knew that there were some students that would be unable to research the topic without a lot of guidance, so I created that document. Then I also knew that there would be students that either didn't do the research portion or still did not understand the assignment, so I created the preparation document and put them into groups with at least one strong student in each group to help guide and prepare the unprepared students for the discussion. I also gave them time to practice what they were going to say before the discussion and allowed them time to practice pronunciation of difficult words. Students in the collaborative class also had the accommodation provided of a second teacher to help guide their research and preparation.

It was obvious that doing this made an impact. From the students mentioned previously (the one who suddenly seemed to "get it" and shared a wonderful point with the class and the one who did not participate but then emailed me later to talk about it) to the many students who responded to the survey that they enjoyed it and want to do more stuff like that in the future, I was given many opportunities to observe the positive impact this exercise had on their learning.

Another impactful moment was the multiple students that, even though I was unable to hide my bias when teaching this topic, they still picked the opposite of what I had made clear was my stance on the topic. I absolutely loved this because it means that they did their own research and formed their own opinions, which is, of course, exactly what the desired outcome was. Finally, I was able to see where quite a few students had their minds changed after the discussion - they listened thoughtfully during the discussion and changed their mind, realizing that they were basing their initial opinion on fear and not facts, for example. I plan to continue to develop their speaking skills (and hopefully with practice leaves shyness) first by conducting a project-based learning (PBL) assessment on generating electricity. The students will be told that we are now NRG (Nottoway Research Group) and we've been tasked with researching methods of generating electricity and creating a presentation, a report, and a robot (using the hummingbird robotics kit) that we will (not really) have to present to the Nottoway Board of Supervisors. Every member of the group has to be a part of the presentation and say at least one thing, so I'm hopeful that will help some of the shyness.

After that, we will be doing discussions within each unit. During our next unit, on heat, we will discuss the best ways to warm up a room, or perhaps cook food (or both) to help them better understand the laws of thermodynamics. For the next unit, which is on sound, we will discuss the difference between "Sound" and "noise." Unit six is about light, and we'll discuss if light is a particle or a wave (that's still up for debate among scientists). Unit seven is motion and energy, and we'll discuss why we have rules against things like running in the hallways and why we have speed limits, as well as why smokers have higher car insurance rates and why the speed limits are different for big trucks at times. The last unit, eight, is about electricity and magnetism, and we'll discuss Edison vs. Tesla, which will likely bring some discussions about ethical behavior by scientists during experiments.

Each discussion will be prefaced with the lecture giving the information needed, then a day to research further into the topics on their own and create opinions. I will likely still have them be in groups for the first few, but eventually I hope to be able to have them prepare on their own, or with just one partner to help listen to them say their peace and give them feedback before the actual discussion is held in class. I would love to have created a group of students that are able to feel comfortable speaking in class and sharing their opinions, even if they differ from their friends or even the teacher/professor.

Overall, taking the Building Academic Discussion Skills class was definitely a beneficial experience for me. It added a great new activity to my arsenal and it really seemed to make a difference in the students' ownership of their learning and their classroom experience. I would love to do this with slightly older students to see how different it would be, but I love my eighth graders so I'm staying right where I am. And we'll just have to start working on the skill earlier in the year in the future.