Overview

In this classroom video, history teacher Kevin Toro uses the Big Paper teaching strategy as he shares primary source documents about the Reconstruction era with his students. This discussion strategy uses writing and silence as tools to help students explore a topic in depth. In a Big Paper discussion, students write out their responses to a stimulus, such as a quotation or historical document. This process slows down students’ thinking and gives them an opportunity to focus on the views of others. It also creates a visual record of students’ thoughts and questions that you can refer to later in a course. You can use this strategy both to engage students who are not as likely to participate in a verbal discussion and to help make sure that students who are eager to talk also listen carefully to the ideas of their classmates. After they participate in this activity several times, students’ comfort, confidence, and skill in using this method increases.

As you watch, consider the following:

1. At 1:07, Mr. Toro says that as students participate in a Big Paper activity, they “are dealing with primary sources, but it almost feels personal in a way.” What do you think he means by that?
2. What role does silence play in this Big Paper activity? What scaffolding might you need to do in your own classroom to make silence an integral component of the activity?
3. At 5:04, examples of the students’ writing on the Big Papers are made visible. What evidence do you see of students making meaning of the texts?

In this video:
Kevin Toro, teacher
11th & 12th grade, Arlington High School
Arlington, MA

Video Goals:
The purpose of watching this video is to:
• Witness how to use this strategy with students.
• Consider how you might use Big Paper in your own classroom.
• Determine the differences between a typical class discussion and a Big Paper discussion.

Lesson Resources:
• Section 2 from The Reconstruction Era and the Fragility of Democracy (pages 42–48)
• Teaching Strategy: Big Paper