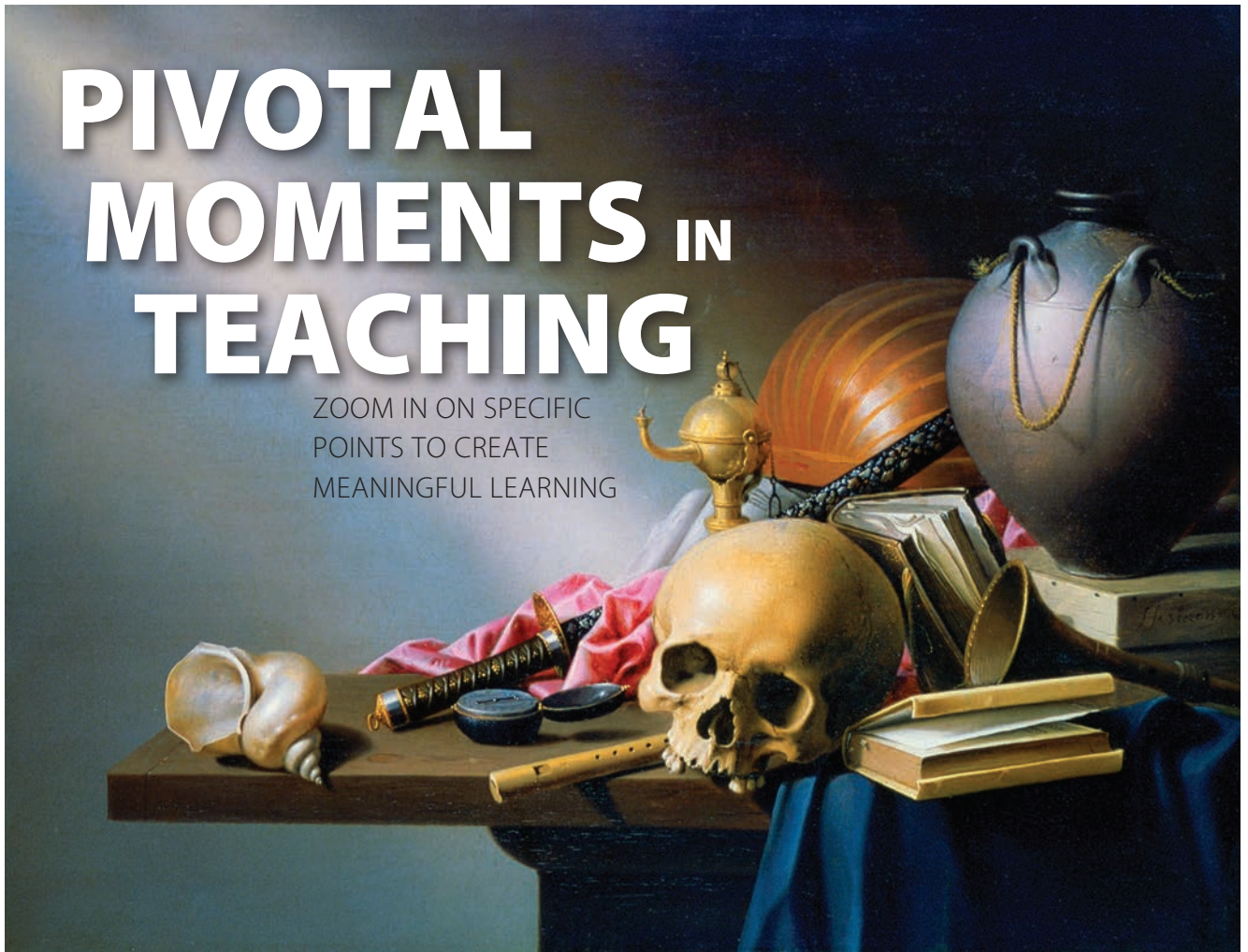


PIVOTAL MOMENTS IN TEACHING

ZOOM IN ON SPECIFIC
POINTS TO CREATE
MEANINGFUL LEARNING



High school English teachers in Nevada used this painting as part of a lesson to deepen students' ability to analyze symbolism in literature.

BY BRADLEY A. ERMELING

Many teachers have experienced the rewards of collaborative lesson planning: the thrill of observing a breakthrough in student learning, the satisfaction that comes from a shared moment of insight, the renewed energy that comes from a fresh perspective on a specific instructional challenge.

We know from previous studies that these benefits are most common when teachers are grouped in job-

alike teams, paired with thoughtful colleagues, guided by strong facilitation, provided with stable settings, and engaged in well-structured protocols (Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009). In practice, however, collaborative planning is not as simple as it appears. Even with the right conditions and support, collaborative planning can be complicated, time-consuming, and difficult to facilitate.

One of the biggest challenges with collaborative planning is balancing the

level of detail and scope of content that can be discussed meaningfully in a limited amount of time. Some groups tackle too much and run out of time to teach the scheduled content. Other groups, facing time constraints, choose to share general instructional ideas or map out a basic outline but never dive into the critical details that often define effective teaching and yield positive results for students.

Since collaborative meeting time is so limited for most schools, it's imperative that teams be judicious with

how they manage these decisions and what they choose to focus on during collaborative work. One underused practice for maximizing collaborative planning is to focus a team's discourse and work on one or two *pivotal teaching segments* for a specific research lesson within a given quarter or semester of instruction.

Pivotal segments are those anticipated moments or specific episodes within a lesson where teachers expect students to experience a key learning opportunity central to the lesson goal. Teacher research groups in China sometimes refer to these as *crucial incidents* (Yang & Ricks, 2012). In other words, the rationale or working hypothesis for the lesson hinges on these segments. Previous and subsequent steps of the lesson are aimed at preparing for or building on these pivotal moments.

In my work as an instructional leadership consultant, I have assisted principals and leadership teams with adopting a focus on pivotal segments as they engage teachers in collaborative inquiry or lesson study projects. For example, a team of high school English teachers in Las Vegas, Nevada, recently began using pivotal segments to focus their collaborative planning meetings and improve student learning.

Although this team has been meeting weekly for the past five years to investigate particular teaching and learning challenges, one obstacle they frequently faced was running out of time or attempting to overload one lesson with too many ideas or strategies.

KEY MATERIALS AND ARTIFACTS

- **Painting:** *The Vanities of Human Life* by Harmen Steenwyck (on previous page). A classic example of a Dutch vanitas painting, where symbols are used to caution a viewer about placing too much emphasis on wealth and pleasures of life.
- **Contrasting movie posters** from the 2009 production of *The Road*, a film based on a novel by Cormac McCarthy that students previously studied in the course.

Poster 1: Ominous picture of a boy and man walking away from an image of destruction and bright light.

Poster 2: Comparatively calming and peaceful image of a man and boy walking toward a city in the horizon with light coming through the clouds.

- Student-generated artistic posters for *Heart of Darkness*.



On these occasions, despite hard work and best intentions, they implemented an unfinished lesson or one that lacked sufficient preparation, particularly for the most critical lesson segments.

In this article, I explain how they used pivotal segments to overcome this problem and create more meaningful teaching and learning opportunities.

GETTING THE STORY STRAIGHT

To leverage the power of pivotal segments, teams begin by establishing clear goals for student learning and the sequence or progression of elements the lesson will use to achieve those goals. We call this establishing a *lesson story line* (Ermeling & Graff-Ermeling, 2016; Roth & Garnier, 2006). Throughout this process, team members should be constructing a *design rationale* for the lesson, including a working hypothesis of how the lesson elements will lead students to a deeper understanding and achievement of the learning goals (Ermeling & Graff-Ermeling, 2016).

For example, for a lesson on Joseph Conrad's book, *Heart of Darkness*, the

Las Vegas team's primary goal was to deepen students' ability to analyze symbolism in literature. They designed the lesson based on the hypothesis that carefully scaffolding students' analysis and understanding of symbolism in visual forms would help students identify the more subtle and discreet literary symbol devices woven into *Heart of Darkness* and other literary works.

THE LESSON HAD THREE PARTS:

1. Discuss and analyze symbolism in the painting *The Vanities of Human Life* by Harmen Steenwyck;
2. Discuss and analyze symbolism in two contrasting promotional posters from the 2009 film *The Road*, based on a novel by Cormac McCarthy that students had studied previously in the course; and
3. Create original artistic posters for *Heart of Darkness* (beginning with a teacher and example, followed by students making their own posters).

FINDING THE LIGHT BULB MOMENTS

Once the storyline and design rationale are in place, teachers identify one or two pivotal lesson segments — key learning opportunities that can make a lightbulb go on for students and help them understand the rest of the lesson. Often there are multiple options for pivotal segments. Specific project objectives and planning needs should drive the team’s choice of those on which to focus. Two teams approaching the same lesson might choose different pivotal segments.

Teachers should then devote the majority of their collaborative meeting time discussing and planning the nuances of these pivotal lesson segments. Key discussion items include: What will the teacher say and not say during the pivotal segments? What probing questions will be used? What are some anticipated student responses to these moments? What possible misconceptions might students have during these pivotal moments, and how should teachers address them? What are some key points to look for as we observe students in action?

The Las Vegas team decided to focus its limited weekly planning time on the first lesson segment, which team members believed was most critical for fostering students’ understanding and analysis skills, based on their hypothesis that analyzing visual art would build students’ capacity to interpret and explain literary symbols.

The team used one full meeting to conduct a trial run of this class discussion about the Harmen Steenwyck painting and generated an example dialogue with hypothetical student responses to guide its collaborative planning (see box above).

After the trial run, teachers spent one additional meeting analyzing the hypothetical dialogue and revising their follow-up responses to better facilitate

EXCERPT FROM ANTICIPATED TEACHER AND STUDENT INTERACTIONS

Teacher: Let’s talk about this painting for a few minutes. Raise your hand and share with the class ONE thing that you noticed in this painting.

Student: I see a **SKULL**.

Teacher: Why is there a skull? What might the skull represent?

Elicit responses and discuss: death, mortality, the frailty of human life.

Student: I see a **SEASHELL** thing.

Teacher: What might the seashell symbolize?

Student: The ocean? Baptism? Travel?

Teacher: Who in the 17th century might be able to travel across the ocean?

Student: Rich people? Explorers?

Teacher: Who would get the shell from the explorer? Probably the person who financed his voyage. So what does the shell symbolize?

Student: Wealth.

Teacher: Oftentimes shells once housed a sea creature, so what might the empty shell symbolize?

Elicit comments and discuss: It is a temporary home. We can’t lay claim to the shell any more than a crab could lay claim to it.

Teacher: What else did you notice?

Student: There’s a **WORD**.

Teacher: Can anyone tell what kind of sword it is? (It’s a Japanese sword.) What does a sword symbolize?

Student: Violence? Death? Killing?

Teacher: Absolutely! So what is the relationship between the sword and the title of the painting?

Elicit responses and discuss: The might of arms cannot defeat death.



student insights around the key symbols and themes. They considered other symbols they might discuss with students using the same pattern of questioning (for example, the book representing knowledge and the extinguished lamp as a symbol of passing time and the frailty of human existence).

While they spent the majority of their time focused on this one pivotal segment, they also used the second half of this final meeting to clarify plans for parts two and three of the lesson — analyzing example movie posters and generating original posters for *Heart of Darkness*.

LISTENING UP

Before implementing, the teachers identified several case study students to follow during the lesson to focus their observations of classroom interactions and strategically collect student work samples for subsequent debrief meetings. The team facilitator, principal, and instructional coach from the school site joined available team members to assist with observations.

During the English lesson, each observer followed one or two of the assigned case study students and documented specific reactions, comments, and discourse exchanges

from the pivotal lesson segment as well as other segments of the lesson.

During the discussion of the painting, observers noted several prominent patterns across the various observations. Students were stimulated with the visual displays, readily verbalized thoughts, and drew important connections between objects in the painting and overall symbolism of the work. Some examples:

- “Everything represents something within the human experience, it’s something that gives life meaning like music, war, knowledge.”
- “I like that it’s really cluttered, it’s not organized. It’s not necessarily one person’s life, it’s everyone’s life.”

Similarly, observers noted that students were able to draw clear connections between specific objects in the painting and the title of the work. One student said, “The clock shows that all the things on the table we only have for a limited amount of time.” Another student said that “these are the things that everyone left behind. It’s just things. Once we are gone, it’s worthless.”

Students were even more engaged in the poster discussions, possibly because they already knew the story represented in the images. Here are some examples:

- “The arm across the boy is like when a mom is in a car with her kid. The dad is holding the boy with one arm and the gun with the other and those two things are the most valuable to him.”
- “The hole in the sky reminded me of how he is supposed to carry the torch. If there’s a little bit of good left in people, maybe he will find it.”
- “The dark side is the dad, but the boy is on the left side in the light, and he’s the one who survives.”

Analysis of student writing samples

from the pair work showed that nearly all student pairs wrote a thoughtful paragraph that explained the meaning of their symbol. In addition, about two-thirds of the class successfully chose textual evidence to support their interpretation of the symbols.

At the same time, the student work samples revealed several areas of continuing need. Only about one-third of the class was able to explain the symbol’s significance to the novel and just over half were able to analyze the symbol in relationship to the overall story and themes of the book.

DEBRIEFING AND REFLECTING ON PIVOTAL SEGMENTS

Focusing on pivotal episodes is useful for facilitating teachers’ post-lesson reflective discussions as well as for lesson planning. Just like the planning elements, these debrief sessions require well-structured agendas and guiding questions that help teams focus their analysis on the pivotal lesson segments and design rationale. Some of the questions used by the English team included:

- What does the evidence from observations and student work suggest about students’ strengths and continuing needs? How did our pivotal instructional segment(s) contribute to this, and what teaching is required to address continuing needs?
- What did we learn about our design rationale? How would we revise the rationale on the basis of our latest evidence and insights?
- What key insights about teaching and learning did we gain from this lesson that might apply to our general teaching practice?

Using these prompts for discussion and reviewing the evidence they

STUDENTS’ WRITINGS AND DRAWINGS ABOUT *HEART OF DARKNESS* BY JOSEPH CONRAD



FOG

“Fog is used to symbolize the unknown since it both literally and metaphorically obscures the characters’ vision.”

THE RIVER

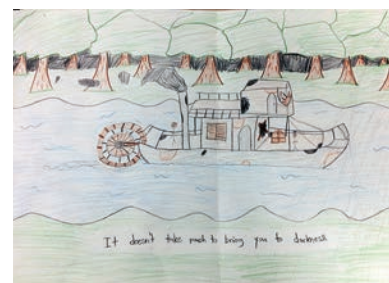
“The River in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* represents that the uncivilized and the civilized humans are all the same, as we all have darkness within.”

SHOES

“Joseph Conrad utilizes shoes as a symbol of the pathways that Marlow could have taken throughout his journey through the African wilderness.”

THE STEAMBOAT

“The steamboat serves as a point of refuge and as a point of transport. It is what leads everyone closer to their goal, but ultimately closer to their corruption.”



collected, the team concluded that the visual scaffolding activities helped stimulate student thinking and foster deeper connections around the use of symbols. Specifically, they noted the value of creating opportunities for students to verbalize their ideas about symbols and articulate their analysis and for teachers and peers to then probe for additional details or explanation.

The team also concluded that students needed further instruction to help students take the next step of constructing written paragraphs that capture the same level of thinking and analysis, including effective use of textual elements and drawing connections to the overall message of the work. These ideas could serve as pivotal lesson segments for future cycles of collaborative planning.

PLANNING FOR DISCOVERY

Few things are more rewarding

in a teacher's career than the pivotal moments of discovery that occur when a skillfully executed instructional practice leads to a successful student outcome. Teams that focus both their planning and reflection on pivotal segments create opportunities for these moments and for yielding important insights about future teaching and learning needs.

Over a six-year period, research at this school site suggests that teachers who use pivotal segments report increased satisfaction with team planning, increased clarity about what they are teaching, better understanding of how their instructional choices affect student outcomes, and renewed commitment to the ongoing refinement of teaching and learning.

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