



How Does Observation Increase Understanding?

by **Laura Mabbott**

What would be a good Throughline? I mulled that question over in my mind for a couple years before trying anything substantial with it. Then, while at a science workshop, I happened to ask a couple of the resident scientists, who were eating lunch together, the following question:

“If you could have 5th graders learn one thing in this unit, what would it be?” In unison they responded, “Observation”. Thus my Throughline was born. In big bold black letters in the front of my classroom is the phrase, “HOW CAN OBSERVATION INCREASE OUR UNDERSTANDING?” Of course this is a key concept in science. Students record observations continually in their Science Journals from which making hypothesis, running investigations then drawing conclusions. But I found observation should be at the heart of all curriculum. In math I had my students observe how their math buddy worked story problems so they could identify what went wrong and what went right. They would then discuss the problem solving techniques and trade places. This observation increased students ability to problem solve. During Literature Circles students observed various concepts such as “connections to self” in their books then discussed them in groups. Their ability to go in depth in literature increased throughout the year. In Social Studies we observed trends, customs, and patterns of past versus present. My 5th graders read picture books and observed and identified the 6 Traits. Observation did increase Understanding.

One particularly poignant demonstration of this happened during a poetry unit. I actually got the idea from reading a case study in the Bay Area summer workshop last year. I first asked my students to identify a poem they liked and to try and figure out why. Numerous books were available for children to look through for a couple of class sessions. Children took the assignment seriously and all students read and searched. Students then read their poems and explained why they liked them. Reasons such as: work choice, alliteration, voice, emotion, sound, rhythm, rhyme, and humor, were all specific explanations by my 5th graders. We then created a matrix using most of the characteristics cited above. Students then broke into pairs to explore and find their favorite example of poetry to fit each characteristic.

My students found and read more poetry in this one week than any of my previous classes with my standard approach to poetry. When we then went on to write poetry their work was more sophisticated and creative than other groups I’ve had before. Observation not only increased Understanding but in addition, increased performance as well.

Next year I will have different ideas, different curriculum focus, but the same Throughline waiting to make each unit richer and fuller.

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