

2017

The Seven Step Strategy

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Recommended Citation

Schaffer, Connie, "The Seven Step Strategy" (2017). *Teacher Education Faculty Publications*. 107.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/tedfacpub/107>

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Is this a familiar scenario? You give students a reading assignment. During class, you pose discussion questions related to the reading. Silence. You rephrase the questions. After an awkward pause, one student responds with a brief answer.

According to the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2010), when students read they should:

- engage beyond the explicit message
- consider important questions and scholarly contributions
- identify relations among ideas
- acknowledge multiple perspectives
- deepen disciplinary conversation

Many well-intended instructors use Socratic or leveled questioning to facilitate the discussion of an assigned reading. While this engages a few students, most can opt to remain silent. The seven step strategy provides an alternative to classroom silence and engages all students. Students discuss a single reading as they progress through increasingly complex cognitive levels (Bloom, 1956). The first several steps resemble familiar think-pair-share strategies. However, by mid-strategy students advance to higher cognitive levels and continue this advancement through the final steps. (See Figure 1)

Steps one through three are each allocated three minutes. Students are given six minutes for step four and again for step five. The strategy concludes with students spending 12 minutes on each of final two steps. Students are actively engaged with the content for a minimum of 45 minutes with much of the time dedicated to higher cognitive levels. Because of the length, instructors may want to reserve the strategy for difficult readings which students struggle to understand or interpret.

To implement the strategy, instructors create **small** groups of four to five students and facilitate the following steps.

1. **Each student creates** a written list of pertinent facts, arguments, and evidence they remember from the reading.
2. **Within their small groups, students** share their individual lists and record a collective list of **recalled** information on a separate piece of paper. **Each group** then exchanges **this list with one other group**.
3. **Within their small groups, students are asked to combine items from their original list with items on the list of the other group. In the process of reviewing the list from the other group, students may recognize information similar to what they had recalled in steps 1 and 2 as well as additional information they had not originally listed.** The newly created list represents a broadened understanding of the reading. Groups again exchange **these revised collective lists with a second group**.
4. Students continue to expand their understanding by reviewing, **again within their small groups**, the list from the second group. **However, during this second review, instructors** ask **the small** groups to apply the information in the reading to other course concepts or their own prior knowledge. Based on this, each group identifies key ideas, the most relevant and important information, from the reading.
5. Instructors **begin to deepen the students'** understanding by facilitating a **whole**-class analysis of the similarities and differences of the various key ideas identified by the groups. Working together, the **class identifies all the key ideas from the reading**.
6. **Returning to** their original **small** groups, **students are now asked to** evaluate the relevance, merit, and potential biases represented in the key ideas created in step 5.

7. Individually, students compose a paragraph synthesizing their original understanding of the reading (recorded in step 1) with the additional information and insights from the discussions in steps 2-6.

The strategy can yield benefits beyond the initial discussion. Instructors can assess understanding by having students submit their individual paragraphs as an assignment or on a discussion board. Students can refer to their synthesis paragraph when they review for examinations or other assessments.

Consider the following implementation for a reading on nationalism. In the first step, a student independently recalls and lists examples of nationalism in the 20th Century and arguments that nationalism led to World War I. In steps two and three, the student exchanges information within his/her **small group as well as with** members of another group. The student's **initial list has now been expanded to include** information such as the definition, contemporary examples, nationalist leaders, and arguments related to the merits or dangers of nationalism.

During the fourth and fifth steps, the instructor draws students deeper into the concept of nationalism by referencing a topic already familiar to students such as Brexit - the exit of Great Britain from the European Union. In small groups, students apply and analyze information in the reading as it relates to Brexit. After the small group discussion, the instructor leads an exchange between groups resulting in a **comprehensive identification** of key ideas including social, economic, and political influences on nationalist movements.

In the final two steps, students engage in complex cognitive tasks related to nationalism. In **their original** small groups, students vet the key ideas and evaluate the extent to which Brexit exemplifies nationalism. Finally, **the student** in our example would synthesizes his/her original recall of facts (20th Century nationalism) with peers' recollections (definitions, merits, and

dangers of nationalism, etc.) as well as the deepened understanding gained through the application, analysis, and evaluation of the concept using Brexit **as a case study**.

Regardless of the topic, the seven step strategy engages students beyond the explicit message of the reading and deepens classroom discussions. Rather than passively listening to the instructor and a handful of peers discuss the reading, every student is engaged with the content at multiple cognitive levels.

Bibliography

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