

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ARMONK, NEW YORK

Author: Trisha Haase, Douglas Maier, Michelle Smith

Title: *Active Listening: A Key to Understanding*

Year: 2011-2012

School/Grade: H. C. Crittenden/ 6th grade science

SUMMARY OF INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Context:

As sixth grade science teachers involved in *Investigators of Practice*, we selected a concentration for inquiry based on our professional needs; this year we hoped to become more knowledgeable in the area of active listening of students within the classroom. This refined focus was justified by the initial research previously conducted on collaborative group work and student engagement. The aforementioned study proved that when the students are involved in group work they are more responsible for their own learning. The outcome proved that peer collaboration in the classroom is one of the best ways to produce student involvement.

Studies show that active listening not only improves the classroom atmosphere but promotes a deeper understanding of content material. Our original research question for this term of investigation was: "What is the most effective way to employ active listening strategies in the classroom?" This question was chosen because research indicates that student learning will be more successful and long-lasting when students are able to pause and process what they have been learning. Young learners need time to absorb and explore new concepts, compare understandings with peers and effectively articulate their questions. Our goal was to allow students the opportunity to explore the big picture in lessons and justify their questions based on concepts taught.

During our action research investigation of 2011, we discovered that student listening during collaborative peer sessions was an area of general weakness. In 2012, we are measuring students' propensity to successfully ask relative questions based on effective listening. We are attempting to determine if students are recognizing that it is important to listen to their peers and use metacognitive skills when sharing their own thoughts, perspectives, and ideas.

Action Plan:

Our research took an exciting turn as we examined articles and recommendations on how to improve active listening in the classroom. We reviewed *Total Participation Techniques: Making Every Student an Active Learner* by William Himmele and Pérsida Himmele, as well as the periodical *Practically Primary* from June 2010. We found the work of Wilson, *Critical Visual Literacy and Restorative Practices: Empowering Talking and Listening*, to be particularly fascinating. *Promoting Active listening in the Classroom* by Mary Renck provided a strong foundation for our study. It is important to note that experts recommended finding a tool that would improve active listening skills. Gregg (1983) estimated that less than 2 percent of the population had any formal experience with listening.

As a result of our research, we created clarifying cards. We hypothesized that “Clarification cards” could help guide students toward the implementation of effective active listening skills by giving them a tool to call for clarification of the curriculum being discussed during instruction. The use of “clarifying cards” encouraged students to listen closely and ask relative, focused questions. These cards were used when a student had the need to clarify a concept or idea they did not fully understand. Students were encouraged to only raise the card in order to specifically address the topic currently being discussed. When these cards were utilized, more questions that were related to clarification of the concept (being taught) were asked. Surprisingly, the data showed that prior to the introduction of clarifying cards, about 75% of questions were inquiries about a hypothetical situation or a comment that was expressed with the intention to have a thought validated, not pertinent to the topic at hand. Frequently, students would ask unrelated anecdotal questions that could be characterized as conversational “what if” questions.

In preparation for our data collection, we coded four different types of questions to monitor during our classroom field work: related inquires, unrelated inquiries, related anecdotes, unrelated anecdotes, and lastly clarifying questions.

Results:

The results of our data collection show that the occurrence of clarification questions increased over a fifteen day period, and the number of related anecdotes and related inquires remained consistent. This evidence shows that the use of clarification cards increased the amount of relevant student questions while maintaining the number of inquiries based on curiosity (related and anecdotal inquiries). We believe that students were more able to actively listen and ask focused questions connected to the curriculum taught due to the presence of the cards. Listening involves the reception and processing of incoming data. To listen is not just to hear; it involves the act of constructing meaning.

During the fifteen day study, unrelated inquiry output was reduced along with unrelated anecdotal commentary. This is significant because in addition to increasing the number of appropriately relevant questions, the clarification cards also reduced the number of extraneous inquiries and comments. We believe that these statistics are correlated. We enabled questions to be more focused while inhibiting the amount of student input that distracted other learners.

Our new focus uncovered that the biggest void in students’ thinking occurred when students did not recognize the wealth of information that could be provided by their peers. When engaging in a collaborative activity, students were not consistently listening to their peers and neglected to utilize group members’ ideas to deepen their individual understandings.

With the use of clarification cards, the majority of our students were asking targeted questions that focused on specific misunderstandings. It was clear that the students who experience higher academic achievement were asking most of the questions when the clarifying cards were not used. When the cards were employed however, it seemed that struggling students were given an opportunity to have their voices heard, and began to raise their “clarification cards” often. Clarification cards seem to make the act of questioning and risk taking safe.

In order to launch an active listening classroom, educators must establish focus, model good listening habits, and have developmentally appropriate expectations. The introduction of clarification cards provided us with an instrument to develop a purpose for listening, communication, and improved acquisition of knowledge.

Implications:

Looking back at our research and practice this year, we concluded that students often need direct lessons on how to ask questions and what type of questions fuel learning. Our “clarification cards” taught students that during a lesson, questions that pertain to the topic are necessary to truly grasp the overall content of the material. As educators, we can help students become effective active listeners by instructing them on how to keep their questioning on topic in order to clear up any confusion. This is a life skill that will prove to be beneficial in all their educational and social endeavors.

We learned that when students reflected upon their questions prior to asking them aloud, they were given the opportunity to hone their metacognitive thinking and active listening skills. By encouraging students to structure their questions in a way that keeps them on topic, they were able to actively connect with the material, thus, gaining a more complete understanding of the concept being taught.

We cannot regard listening as a passive, automatic aspect of language and, instead appreciate that “We hear with our ears, but we listen with our minds” (Garman & Garman, 1992).

Since our research this year helped us to reduce off task behaviors, we are interested in learning new ways to focus student attention and increase active listening. We have found that students who are proficient active listeners tend to follow directions correctly the first time they are given. As a result, these students spend more time on task. Active listening skills enable students to use their time wisely. Research shows that active listeners do not spend unnecessary time fixing mistakes made due to passive listening. We wonder how much time students spend organizing their thoughts or materials due to passive listening. We would like to know how we can teach students to use their time more effectively by increasing active listening and reducing their passive listening time in class.

CLARIFY CARD



To make or
become clear

CLARIFY CARD



To make or
become clear

CLARIFY CARD

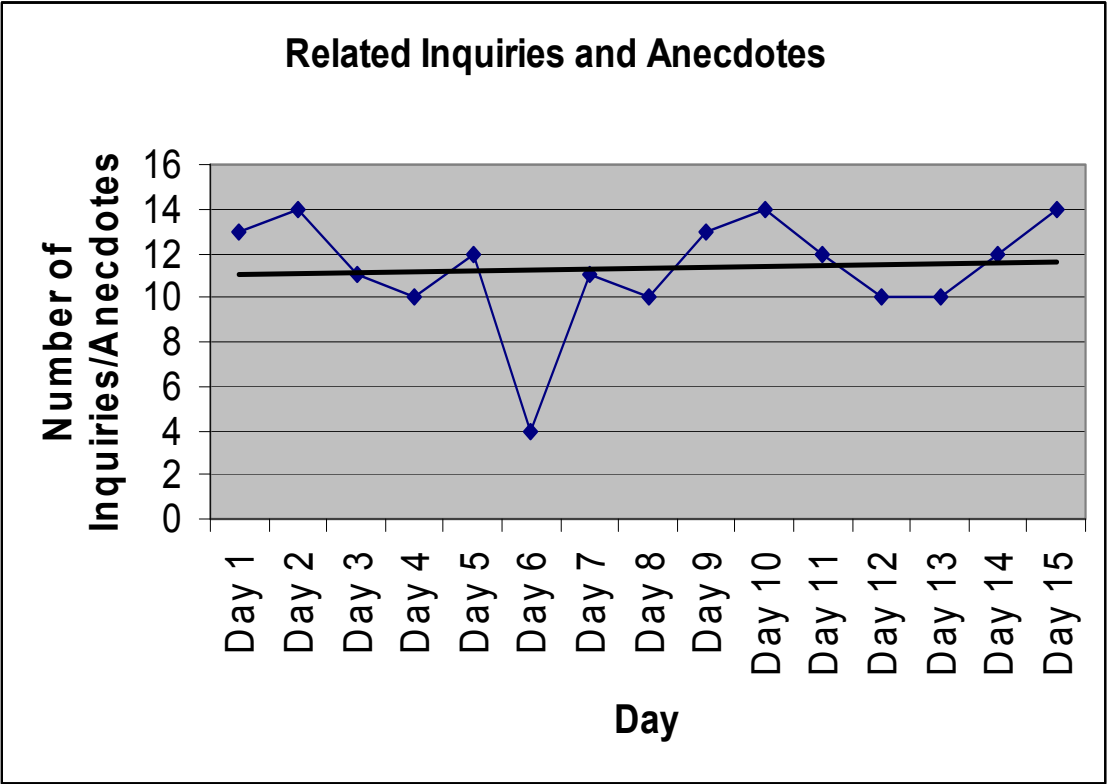
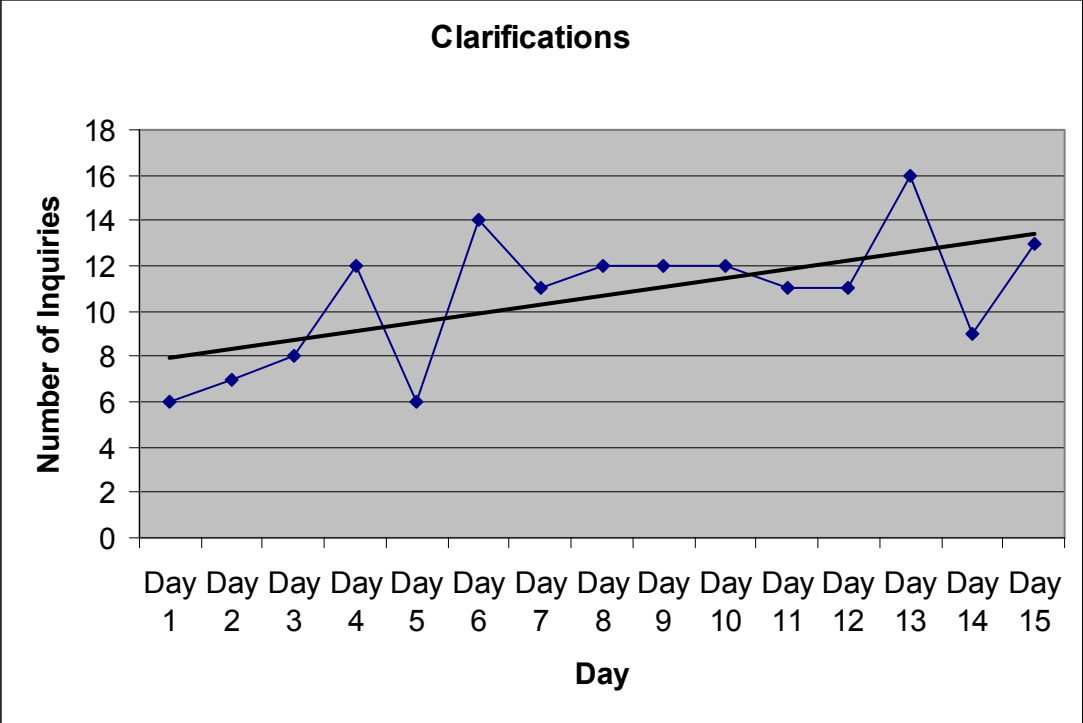


To make or
become clear

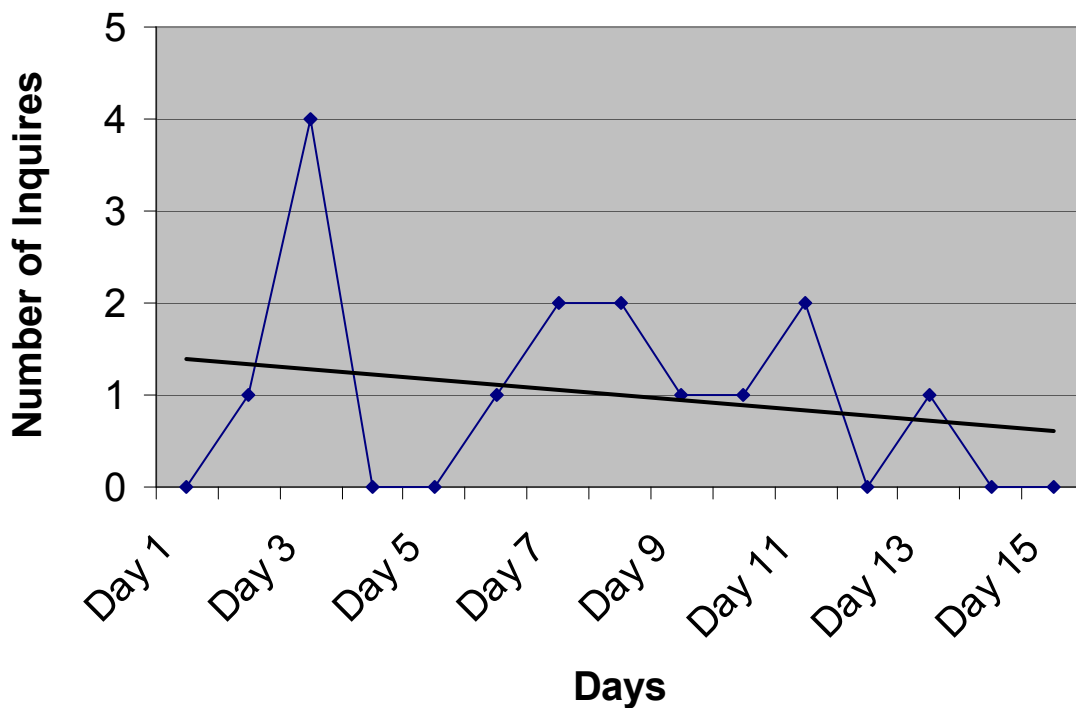
CLARIFY CARD



To make or
become clear



Unrelated Inquiries



Unrelated Anecdotes

