

Synthesis Discussion & Project Protocol

Applying Learning through Academic Discourse and Creative Projects

Purpose

The Synthesis Discussion & Project is the culmination of each unit where students deepen their learning through academic discussions and a differentiated group project. The objectives of the Synthesis Discussion & Project are for students to:

- Individually articulate and defend a response to the Focus Question for the unit.
- As a group, use academic discourse to collaboratively discuss and negotiate a shared response to the Focus Question for the unit.
- As a group, plan, develop, and present a project to communicate a shared response to the Focus Question for the unit.

Synthesis Discussion

The purpose of the Synthesis Discussion is to provide opportunities for students to practice engaging in academic discourse. Research shows that students do not engage in academic discourse without instruction on how to do so.¹ Students need to learn the techniques for academic communication, such as clarifying, elaborating, identifying common ground, and respecting differences of opinion. Students who practice sharing and supporting their ideas in a low-stakes environment can then transfer these strategies to independent conversations with peers or small groups.

Help your students learn specific academic discourse routines, followed by a gradual release to independence with your continued monitoring. Help your students develop the ability to explain what opinions, background experiences, and evidence from the text combine to inform their particular point of view. Not all students are comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions, so be aware of and sensitive to students' comfort levels, personality types, and cultural backgrounds. Encourage and support students, and use scaffolding to provide a safe entry point into the group conversation. Promote confidence by helping students find evidence for their opinions before explaining or defending them to their peers. Encourage students to follow discussion rules and create a supportive learning environment free of antagonism where students can think critically and argue effectively and respectfully.

Some key elements of effective discussions are²:

- Disagreeing and challenging
- Requesting justification
- Building off another's point
- Conceding a point
- Synthesizing and problem-solving

Synthesis Project

The purpose of the Synthesis Project is to provide an opportunity for students to plan, develop, and present a project that effectively communicates the group's shared response to the Focus Question. This type of project allows students to creatively apply the knowledge that they have learned to a real-world application. Synthesis projects should include adequate explanation, examples, or evidence to logically defend their group's shared response.

¹ Jeff Zwiers, *Building Academic Language: Meeting Common Core Standards Across Disciplines, Grades 5-12*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 259.

² Zwiers, "Facilitating Whole-Class Discussions for Content and language Development," chap. 5 in *Building Academic Language*.

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Help students choose a project that conveys an appropriately complex group response to the Focus Question. The project scope should also be appropriate to the number of students in the group and the time allotted. A scope that is too ambitious will result in frustration; a scope that is too small will lead to shallow exploration of the topic and unequal participation. Be an active facilitator in helping students select an appropriate project type so that all students have a voice, but make sure that students feel ownership in their choice of project. If you want, you can limit the project types available until your students are familiar with the collaboration, discussion, planning, and development steps.

Project Ideas	
Poster presentation	Written dramatic script
Digital slide presentation	Written narrative
Video: commercial	Written report
Video: narrative	Creative expression: song or rap
Vlog-style video	Creative expression: visual art
Audio podcast	Creative expression: expressive dance
Written poetry	Creative expression: instrumental music

Differentiation

You can adapt the Synthesis Discussion & Project to your judgment, your instructional environment, or your students' needs and skills. Provide materials, resources, or scaffolding to help students from a variety of backgrounds actively participate in the project. Set expectations for the scope of the project within the students' zone of proximal development to provide opportunities for growth.

Though each Synthesis Project is focused on the same Focus Question and Passages, the project is a naturally differentiated task.³ Students may have natural affinities for one type of project communication over another; this natural point of differentiation lets students to bring a variety of assets to their group. You can also use the Synthesis Project to encourage students to explore new areas. Allowing students to choose the kind of project they want to do is a key aspect of differentiation.⁴

Materials

- Copies of the Student Synthesis Discussion & Project Checklist, for group leaders to guide their groups through the discussion, planning, project, and presentation steps.
- Copy of the Discussion Questions (optional), for teachers to discuss each Passage before students begin the Synthesis Discussion & Project.

³ Maryann Cucchiara, *3Ls™ Learning, Language, and Literacy* (Washington, D.C.: Council of the Great City Schools, August 2018), https://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/251/2018_09%20Final%203Ls%20Brochure--non-booklet.pdf

⁴ Carol A. Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms*, 3rd ed. (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2017).

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Teacher Preparation

1. Review the Focus Question for the unit.
2. Review or post the Group Discussion Rules where you and students can refer to them.
3. Review and discuss the Discussion Questions with your class. You can discuss these questions after you read each Passage individually or collectively before you begin the Synthesis Discussion & Project.
4. Choose or consider group leaders for each student group.

Each student group will have a group leader for the duration of the Synthesis Discussion and Project. You may want to choose a more developed leader for the first few units, but with preparation, most students can become effective group leaders. For students who are reluctant to lead a group, talk to them privately about how they feel. Review the responsibilities of a group leader with them and ask them to observe what their group leader does. Help them set a goal for when they might be ready to be a group leader. Provide opportunities for students to challenge themselves, but be respectful of students' individual needs and limits.

A group leader should:

- Make sure that the group follows the Group Discussion Rules and is respectful to each members' ideas and comments.
- Make sure that each group member has an opportunity to share their ideas.
- Direct the group through each step of the Student Synthesis Discussion & Project Checklist to discuss, plan, and develop the Synthesis Project. Make sure that the group completes all the steps on the checklist.
- Monitor group participation and involve every group member.
- Lead the group in presenting the Synthesis Project to the class.

Lesson Plan

1 Set Expectations for Group Discussion

Introduce the Synthesis Discussion & Project to your students. Explain that students will work in small groups to discuss their individual answers to the Focus Question and then synthesize those answers into a project that communicates the group's shared understanding. Explain the purpose of the group leader and review their responsibilities. By setting expectations with all your students about the role and responsibilities of the group leader, you can help students grow in their leadership understanding and abilities.

Prepare students for the Synthesis Discussion by showing or explaining the Group Discussion Rules. Ask students how these rules can help each group have fair and academic discussions. You may want to post the Group Discussion Rules in your classroom for students to reference during their group discussions.

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Group Discussion Rules

Show others that you are listening to them.

Give everyone a turn to talk.

You are allowed to have your own opinion, but you have to explain and defend it.

As your students become familiar with this protocol, you can review or skip this step.

2 Share and Clarify Individual Responses to the Focus Question

Help students share, clarify, and understand each student's individual responses to the Focus Question. Review the Focus Question for the unit as a class, then divide students into groups of 3–4 and choose a group leader for each group. Distribute the Student Synthesis Discussion & Project Checklist to group leaders so they can help their group through the discussion, planning, project, and presentation steps.

Help group leaders initiate and facilitate a discussion where each member shares their individual answers to the Focus Question. As each student shares their thoughts, other members of the group should prompt the student to clarify, elaborate, and justify their position using phrases and questions like:

- *I think that you're saying... is that right?*
- *Could you explain to me why you think that?*
- *I have a question about what you're saying...*
- *Can you think of something you read that supports your idea?*

As each group discusses their answers to the Focus Question, point out when students use academic discourse appropriately and help facilitate good discussion behaviors. For example:

- *I like the way that Stewart asked for clarification. He was very respectful, but he asked Elle to provide evidence.*
- *Lakeisha said that she thinks that technology does more harm than good. We want Lakeisha to know that her opinion is valid, so how can we ask her to explain and defend her opinion in a positive way?*
- *Are you allowed to disagree with Megan's opinion? Is she allowed to disagree with you?*

Help students understand that critical thinking involves seeking to understand your own position, as well as others' opinions. Create a safe environment where students can share ideas and explain them in a constructive way. Help students focus on developing the ability to explain how their opinions and background, combined with evidence from the text, make up their individual point of view.

3 Collaborate and Negotiate a Shared Response to the Focus Question

Help students in the group negotiate their individual answers to the Focus Question into a shared response. Once students have shared their individual answers to the Focus Question, the group leader helps the group synthesize their answers into a shared response to the Focus Question.

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Group leaders can encourage participation by asking questions like:

- What do our answers to the Focus Question have in common? (*I noticed that we all said something about...*)
- What if we focus in this area?
- Do you feel that everyone’s ideas are included?
- We can all have different opinions. Do we have something in common that we can agree on?

As students collaborate, they don’t need to change their individual answers to the Focus Question, but encourage them to look for shared elements to define their group answer.

Help students develop an appropriately complex group answer, based on the skill level of the students in the group.

Focus Question: What counts as communication?	
Simplistic Group Answer	Talking
Appropriately Complex Answer	Anything that people do to share an idea is communicating.
Appropriately Complex Answer	While language is an important part of communication, non-verbal communication is just as powerful—sometimes more powerful.

4 Plan and Develop a Synthesis Project

Help students choose, plan, and develop a group project that will communicate their group answer to the Focus Question. Make sure students are aware of project expectations by displaying the rubric or distributing a copy of the rubric to each group. The first time students create a project, spend a few minutes talking with the class about what each parameter of the rubric means.

Group leaders should use the Student Synthesis Discussion & Project Checklist to help their group through the discussion, planning, project, and presentation steps. If you want, you can ask students to turn in the checklist as an artifact to use for grading, or students can simply use it as a guide through the process of planning and developing their group project.

Group leaders can encourage participation by asking questions like:

- What are your talents and interests?
- How can your talents and interests help us with your project?
- What will we create to communicate our group answer to the Focus Question?
- Will our project provide an opportunity for each person in the group to contribute? What will each person do?
- What is our plan to complete our project? Can we do this project in the allotted time?
- When we create our project, what part do you want to help with?
- What will our final presentation look like? What do you want to contribute?
- Is our project complete? Are there any errors? If so, how can we fix them?
- When we present our project, what will it look like? Who will speak first? What part do you want to do?

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Monitor students as they work to ensure participation and cooperative behavior. Ask questions about how each group’s project connects to the Focus Question and how they are integrating specific examples, symbols, or references to the Passages in the unit. Help students translate their appropriately complex shared response to the Focus Question into an appropriately complex group project that communicates their shared response.

Focus Question: What counts as communication?	
Simple Group Answer	Talking
Simple Group Project	A dramatization of students talking.
Complex Group Answer	Anything that people do to share an idea is communicating.
Complex Group Project	A video where multiple forms of communication are depicted with a narrator explaining that ideas are shared through talking, texting, drawings or other art forms, and in many languages.
Complex Group Answer	While language is an important part of communication, non-verbal communication is just as powerful—sometimes more powerful.
Complex Group Project	A dance where each student demonstrates a different emotion through their movements and then the students conclude together with movement showing excitement.

5 Present the Synthesis Project

Have each group take turns presenting their Synthesis Project. If a group has created a non-verbal project (instrumental music, dance, visual art, etc.), invite them to share a brief overview explaining the connection between their Synthesis Project, Passages, and the Focus Question before they present their project. Providing a brief overview helps students make explicit connections between their Synthesis Project, Passages, and the Focus Question, and gives you insight into the students’ thinking and rationale.

Example Synthesis Project	
<p>A small group addresses the Focus Question: What is art? Their group answer to the question is that art is a skillful piece of work that connects people to ideas and feelings.</p> <p>Because two of the three group members have outside interests in music, the group decides to demonstrate music as art. They plan to show and explain how a skillful performance connects to the audience’s ideas and feelings better than an unskillful performance.</p> <p>Ava likes rap music and volunteers to create an example of an unskillful rap piece and then play a short recording of a professional rap piece. She agrees to perform the original rap piece, play the recording, and then explain how the the skillful composition makes a better connection to the audience.</p>	<p>Liam plays piano and agrees to get permission to record himself playing a piece badly and playing a piece well in the school music room. He plans to introduce his pieces and describe the effect that a skillful performance has on an audience.</p> <p>The group decides that Jayden, the group leader, will lead the presentation. Jayden agrees to introduce their project and the team members and point out specific parts of the Passages that support their project. All group members contribute to identifying supporting parts of the Passages even though Jayden will present the points they decide are most relevant to share.</p>

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Evaluation

After all the student groups have presented their Synthesis Projects, use this rubric (online or offline) to evaluate each group's project. This rubric evaluates:

- **Participation:** How much each student participated in the group discussion and project development.
- **Planning & Execution:** How well the group planned and executed their project.
- **Focus:** How well the group project answered the Focus Question.
- **Synthesis:** How well the group synthesized the ideas in the Passages into a cohesive answer to the Focus Question, and how well the project represents the shared response to the Focus Question.
- **Scope:** How well-developed the project was, given the amount of time the group had to work and the number of students in the group.
- **Attention to Detail:** How complete the project was and how many errors there were.

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SYNTHESIS PROJECT RUBRIC

	1 Needs Development	2 Emerging	3 Competent	4 Exceptional
Participation	One or more students did not contribute to the discussion or the project.	Students contributed to the discussion and project with a wide disparity of participation.	All students contributed to the discussion and project somewhat equally.	All students contributed to the discussion and project equally.
Planning & Execution	Project was poorly executed and shows no evidence of planning.	Project was executed with some evidence of planning and coordination.	Project was executed with adequate planning and coordination.	Project was executed with fully-developed planning and collaboration.
Focus	Project did not answer the Focus Question.	Project somewhat answered the Focus Question.	Project answered the Focus Question.	Projects showed creative or sophisticated thinking in answering the Focus Question
Synthesis	Project did not show understanding and synthesis of the ideas in the unit's Passages.	Project showed some understanding and synthesis of the ideas in the unit's Passages.	Project showed understanding and synthesis or the ideas in the unit's Passages.	Project showed strong understanding and synthesis of the ideas in the unit's Passages.
Scope	Project scope was smaller than expected for the time allotted and number of students in the group.	Project scope was near expected size for the time allotted and number of students in the group.	Project scope was appropriate for the time allotted and number of students in the group.	Project scope went beyond expectations for the time allotted and the number of students in the group.
Attention to Detail	Project was partially completed with significant errors.	Project was complete with significant errors.	Project was complete with minor errors	Project was complete with no errors.

Student Synthesis Discussion & Project Checklist

Group leaders should use this checklist to guide their group through the discussion and planning steps of the Synthesis Project. Write down any notes that will help your group remember important ideas and help your teacher see your work. Attach any group project plans and notes to this checklist.

Unit: _____
 Focus Question: _____
 Group Leader: _____
 Group Members: _____

Step	✓
1 Share and Clarify Individual Responses to the Focus Question	
Has everyone shared their individual answer to the Focus Question? Do we all understand each others' individual answers to the Focus Question?	
2 Collaborate and Negotiate a Group Response to the Focus Question	
What do our individual answers to the Focus Question have in common? How can we create a group answer around what we have in common?	
What is our group answer to the Focus Question?	
3 Plan the Synthesis Project	
What talents or interests do we have among our group members? How can these talents and interests help us with our project?	
What is our plan to complete the project? Can we do this project in the allotted time?	
4 Develop the Synthesis Project	
Will our project provide an opportunity for everyone in the group to contribute? What will each person do?	
What will we create to communicate our group answer to the Focus Question? What can we do to convey our response in a way that will be convincing to others?	
What will our final presentation look like? What will each person contribute to the presentation?	
Are there any errors with our presentation? If so, how can we fix them?	