The Graphic Organizer and Extended Thinking

Graphic organizers are a valuable instructional tool, but they have limitations. How can we use them to elicit the kind of thinking demanded by the new Florida Standards?

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Graphic organizers (GOs) help students to sort out ideas and facts, and in this they can be extremely useful as they make information visible and show the relationships and connections among pieces of information.

However, GOs, while a useful tool, can become a crutch that ultimately impedes more extensive exploration of the content.

GOs give students a framework for identifying and organizing content. We hand out the chart or the map, and the students get busy filling in the circles or squares. However, if this is as far as the students go with the content, have they accomplished the critical thinking, deeper learning and skill mastery we hope for?

Or have we done our students' thinking for them, depriving them of the opportunity to make their own meaning of the material?

In today's world where critical analysis and the ability to clearly articulate our thinking are necessary skills, students must learn to form questions, analyze and organize their ideas, draw connections and conclusions, and communicate convincingly through speaking and writing. Following are two strategies for accomplishing that.

1. **Empower students to think for themselves**

GOs can be effective for introducing students to a particular conceptual framework, whether it be the well-known Venn diagram for comparison, the sunburst diagram, or a concept map to identify trends or connections within a passage or passages.

However, once our students understand these various approaches to arranging content within a given framework, they need to learn how to develop their own frameworks, to identify the nature and structure of the content, and to arrange it in a way that makes sense.

We can scaffold instruction to help them learn this skill. Begin by modeling, using an accessible, grade-level text. Work together as a class to analyze the text for ideas and connections, and create a GO together that effectively captures the shape of the information. Follow this with a similar assignment allowing the students to work in pairs as the teacher circulates to offer support. And finally, have students create such frameworks on their own.

Teaching students to create GOs of their own empowers them to independently seek out the ideas, organization and connections present in a text or set of texts, and to visualize and arrange those ideas in a way that helps them make sense of the information for themselves. This leads to a deeper

engagement with the content than simply responding to a structure that has been provided for them, and to a deeper understanding and mastery of the content.

2. Extend student thinking

So your students now have the skill to create their own GOs representing their understanding of the facts, ideas, relationships and connections within the content. We can now take our students' thinking even further, as these completed GOs provide a rich stimulus for student writing.

Have students write an explanation or analysis of what the GO shows them. In the beginning, students may need some guidance, similar to the gradual release model described above. First, help students to articulate the central idea(s) that the GO represents. Next, they must determine the best way to explain or support that idea, deploying the information and relationships displayed by the GO in a logical way. They likely will also need help with transitional strategies to ensure cohesion and to clarify the connections among the ideas. Finally, they will need to consider the implications of their information and articulate a conclusion.

By summarizing, explaining, describing, comparing or evaluating the information they collected in the GO, the student will develop a deeper and more cohesive understanding of the content and clearly demonstrate their thinking and learning. As a bonus, such student writing gives the teacher a window into the student's thinking, allowing us to monitor and assess student learning and more accurately gauge the next steps in instruction, whether it be targeted remediation, extension activities or moving on to the next piece of content.