

VIGNETTE ACTIVITY

1. As you read the vignette below:
 - Underline descriptions of student engagement
 - Circle specific literacy tasks
 - Highlight any descriptions of a motivating and supportive learning environment coupled with effective instruction
2. Discuss activity with a partner
3. How might the examples of engagement, motivation, and supportive learning environment coupled with effective instruction be integrated into a lesson in your classroom?

Vignette

The 8th grade students on the Dream Team at Lincoln Middle School were studying the topic of water quality. For this interdisciplinary unit, Kamal, Ayan, Mara, and Erika were put into a group. None of them really understood why watersheds were important when they began the project. The first assignment was to read and discuss a chapter in the science book. The terminology was hard, and they really did not understand what the chapter was about even after previewing it. But the science teacher provided strategies for learning the vocabulary and reading the text, so even though the group members were not inspired, they were able to complete the assignment. Members of Kamal's group became more interested when they saw the results of a local survey of waste disposal habits of businesses and households. The results indicated that “really disgusting stuff” was being dumped near the city's main supply of drinking water. Students listened to a local scientist and a government official talk about watershed and water treatment issues—policies, pollution, protections, and current threats. Students then took a tour of the local water treatment plant. In social studies class they debated the pros and cons of bottled water in terms of environmental and equity issues. Based on additional research and responses to e-mail questions submitted to the speakers, the students created a physical model of the watershed and the water treatment facility and discussed possible areas of concern.

Each team of four identified key questions and went into the field to conduct tests of water and soil for the presence of pollutants. Then they learned to read government charts representing safe levels of these substances in the public water supply and technical documents describing the treatment plan for the city. Kamal's team carefully compared its test results with the information on the charts. What they found was disturbing. Levels of certain toxic substances and bacteria were high in the reservoir, but the water treatment facility was not addressing the problem by changing the treatment of the water, suggesting that the city's drinking water may not be safe. The teachers encouraged the students to report their findings using PowerPoint presentations. Students were given a specific format for presenting their questions, data, conclusions, and recommendations. Together with teachers, the students developed a rubric for each component of the presentations. The two presentations with the highest scores based on the rubric would be presented to the city council.

The members of Kamal's team worked hard on their presentation—harder than they had ever worked before. Kamal and his fellow group members checked and rechecked facts, read and

reread articles, discussed and debated what the recommendations should be, and revised and edited their presentation. To make sure they understood what they were reading, the group took the articles to the Learning Center during lunch, where a teacher showed them some strategies for finding facts and taking notes. They used these strategies to tackle some tough text, including findings from a scientific report. The two students with limited English proficiency in the group, Ayan and Mara, asked the others repeatedly if what they wrote was “OK.” Kamal, usually apathetic when it came to school, saw this issue as important—he had four younger brothers and sisters, and his family used tap water for cooking and drinking all the time; he wanted it to be safe. Erika, who was usually shy in class but who really liked music, made up a theme song about water safety to accompany their presentation.

When Kamal's team's presentation was chosen as one of the two to be shared at the city council meeting, their classmates were surprised. But Kamal and his teammates were not—this was an important opportunity to be heard. In their minds, this was much more important than the rest of the stuff they usually did at school—and they were willing to put in the time and effort to do it right. When a staff writer from the local newspaper attended the presentation and pressured the city to respond to the students' findings, the students knew their effort had been worthwhile.