

“Tea Party”

PURPOSE The Tea Party is a strategy that assists students in drawing together relevant knowledge needed to successfully learn a new concept or in a new domain. It is useful as a pre-reading activity or prior to a lecture or multi-media event, for example. It can be used to draw on prior knowledge and experience, help support concept development, introduce new vocabulary, or increase motivation through identifying personal areas of interest or learning.

The activity is called a tea party because the participants attempt to have conversations with most everyone in the room. By doing so, they have the opportunity to develop a framework for understanding new content and information in a short period of time. The activity is designed so that **all** students, struggling and skilled readers, can meaningfully participate.

DESCRIPTION The Tea Party is a structured yet open-ended activity that engages students in thinking, talking and writing about a text before they read it. It introduces students to samples of the text’s ideas, vocabulary, or other components of the text on which the teacher wants to focus. At the beginning of the activity, each student is given an index card with a word, phrase, or sentence taken from the text. Students walk around the room, locate a partner, and share what is on their card and how it might relate to the card of the person with whom they are talking. These short conversations are repeated numerous times until the teacher calls time. Then, students meet in a small group to synthesize their ideas about what they have come to understand about the text through discussion and a written statement. Each small group shares their statement with the whole group and together they make reasoned predictions about the text they will read.

The tea party can be done effectively with approximately 10-50 people. The entire activity takes less than an hour.

PREPARATION In preparing for a tea party, the teacher must consider the genre and purpose of reading. S/he must consider what s/he already knows about how the readers might interact with the text and what might be challenging, interesting, and thought-provoking about it.

Prepare index cards by choosing sentences, phrases, or single words from the text to write on index cards. Select about half as many phrases (or sentences or words) as there are students. Carefully consider the following:

- Chose phrases that help serve your (and your students’) purposes for reading. If the text is a novel, for example, choose phrases that give insight into characters, setting, and conflict.
- Choose some phrases that might be interpreted in multiple ways.
- If the text is a book, choose words from the first chapter or first section.
- Don’t paraphrase the text. You can omit words to shorten a phrase, but use the same vocabulary.

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INSTRUCTIONS

Step 1: Organize students into small groups

Assign four to six students to sit around a table or into grouped desks. Explain that students will return to these groups at the end of the tea party.

Step 2. Distribute one card to each student

Explain that cards should be kept private for now, but will be shared soon.

Step 3. Introduce the tea party

As students move around, encourage them to have brief paired conversations. They should read their card aloud to their partner and begin discussing what the text might be about.

Step 4. Return to small groups for discussion

Encourage students to discuss what they presume is happening in the text and why. Encourage them to think about the different conversations they had with people holding different cards and the various meanings that emerged from their conversations. They may also want to read their cards to their group members.

Step 5. Write a “we think” statement

Group members choose a recorder to write down the group’s “we think” statement. The first sentence should begin, “We think this book (or poem or article) is about....” Encourage students to discuss what inferences they made to reach their prediction.

Step 6. Share “we think” statements with the whole group

Group members choose someone to read their statement and briefly explain their prediction. Their explanations help them demonstrate what they know about how texts work and raise questions about what they want to know. Students may want to know the “right” answer, what the book is “really” about. It is important to encourage them to think and talk about what they know so far and how they know it. Reinforce that they will learn what the book is about when they read it.

APPLICATIONS

This activity can be tailored to a variety of heterogeneous groups of readers across grade levels and genres of text (novels, poems, short stories, primary documents, scientific text, biographies, plays, picture books, etc.). The teacher can adapt the content of the tea party to the needs of the learning unit and the learners.

By listening to what students say about the samples of the text they are given before they read the whole text, the teacher gains insight into the ideas and knowledge students bring to the text and what meanings emerge as important. The activity provides early assessment information for what and how the teacher might need to scaffold meaning-making with the text. The tea party can help readers

- make connections between ideas in the text and what they already know;
- interact with portions of the text prior to reading;
- practice sequencing, find cause and effect relationships, draw comparisons, make inferences, make predictions;
- identify vocabulary that might be a problem;
- construct meaning before they begin reading a text;
- establish a purpose for reading; and
- begin to make inter-textual connections.

The tea party is a powerful strategy to help **all** readers connect with a text before they begin to read it. As the class reads the text together, revisit the predictions that were made during the tea party and discuss the new information that changes the meaning students are making with the text. Students often return to phrases they recognize from the tea party and bring new meaning to them.

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CONTENT AND GRADE-LEVEL EXAMPLES

High School Biology

Students are going to begin a project on water quality and its effects on the overall health of an ecosystem. In addition to their textbook's information about the biological qualities of water, you plan to assign readings from scientific journals and news reports about ground water quality, water treatment and drinking water standards in your county. You prepare students for the first reading using the Tea Party. The cards you create have phrases that include different biological and chemical terms from the article in addition to research and policy language that they will encounter. Students' "we think" statements help you gauge the level of experience students have with these ideas and their conceptions of cause and effect relationships of water quality and contributing factors. They also help you assess their comprehension related concepts they have already learned. Students begin to talk about water pollution as a problem they can help to solve.

Middle School French

You are going to the computer lab today where you've bookmarked a popular French language news website that the students will be reading to begin a research project on Francophone countries in Africa. You know there will be some unfamiliar vocabulary words and concepts in what they will read so you use the Tea Party for the first half of class to introduce new vocabulary and important content. During the Tea Party, students share their cards that have written on them phrases that include new as well as familiar vocabulary and idiomatic expressions. During the "we think" part of the activity, students create statements that predict the content of the website. They will also demonstrate how much of the content they could infer and how well they will understand vocabulary and idioms used in the online resource.

Tenth Grade Mathematics

Students will be working in groups today to solve a complex motion problem that requires them to utilize several formulas and concepts. You want to scaffold this experience without reducing the problem to a series of formulas and steps to follow, so you host a Tea Party that focuses on concepts that you've identified as relevant for possible approaches to addressing this problem. You have prepared the index cards with phrases including useful concepts and mathematical formulas. During the Tea Party, students work in pairs to figure out what the concepts and formulas mean and how they could be used together for some purpose. Their "we think" statements synthesize their group members' cards into a report on what kind of problems they believe they could solve with the concepts and formulas they've been given.

Fourth Grade Social Studies

Students are studying state history. They have read a range of expository text about the history of your state. You are now going to introduce a historical fiction novel set in the state that looks more deeply at a particular regional event and surrounding social and political factors. You want your students to be able to identify historical fact and literary elements in the narrative. In addition, you want students to compare this text's representation of historical events to other representations in resources they've been using. You organize a Tea Party to remind them of what they already know about the time and place and to introduce elements of the narrative, such as characters, conflict and setting. Cards they use may include elements of history and fiction that position the two disciplines together and separately. You expect their "we think" statements to include historical information they have learned and you are eager to hear how they weave those facts into the narrative of the novel.

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CONTENT AND GRADE-LEVEL EXAMPLES *continued*

Faculty Development

You are a literacy coach who has been working with the faculty to implement writing across the curriculum. You have led some formal professional development sessions already and now you want to give the teachers a chance to talk about how they plan to put into practice what they have been hearing about. You also want them to raise questions or concerns about writing across the curriculum in the work they do. At your weekly faculty development meeting, you distribute an article that describes classrooms using writing across the curriculum in several content areas. You plan to scaffold a discussion at the next week's meeting so you host a Tea Party to increase the teachers' motivation and professional interest in reading the article. You also want the Tea Party to provide an opportunity for teachers to practice using the discourse of the new framework for teaching writing and to begin to build connections with each other across diverse content and pedagogical orientations. The cards you prepare have short phrases describing students' writing in different contexts and phrases that contextualize important concepts from the new approach to writing. You anticipate that the "we think" statements will reveal some of the meaning teachers are making of the new program and facilitate the discussion of comparing classroom contexts and implementations. You hope the discussion of their "we think" statements will raise some questions for teachers' own practice of infusing writing into their lessons that can be discussed at the next meeting.

First Grade

You are beginning a unit on neighborhoods and you plan to use a series of picture books, photographs, film, maps and oral story telling. Because your students are emergent readers, you prepare for a Tea Party using images from the book you will use to begin the unit, *Madlenka*, by Peter Sis. Your "cards" are color photocopies of pages and enlargements of sections of pages from the book, some that include words, others that do not. During the Tea Party, students talk to their peers about the picture they have and make connections across different pictures. The class creates a "we think" statement as you write their predictions on a large pad at the front of the carpeted area. In your discussion, students identify different characteristics of neighborhoods, discuss their own neighborhoods and predict the sequence of the story of Madlenka's neighborhood.

Sis, P. *Madlenka*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Reference

Beers, K. *When kids can't read what teachers can do*. New York: Heinemann, 2003