

THE EXPLANATION GAME

A routine for exploring causal understanding

The routine focuses first on identifying something interesting about an object or idea:

I notice that....

And then following that observation with the question:

Why is it that way? or Why did it happen that way?

Purpose: What kind of thinking does this routine encourage?

This is a routine for understanding why something is the way it is. This routine can get at either causal explanation or explanation in terms of purposes or both.

Application: When and where can it be used?

You can apply it to almost anything: a pencil, cell phones, forms of government, historical documents, and events. Students can work in pairs or groups of larger size, even a whole class. The explanation game can also be used solo. The first time the routine is used, the teacher may need to take an active role in scaffolding the conversation and modeling how to ask questions of explanation and clarification if others. Over time, students can begin to emulate the conversational moves and questioning they have seen modeled.

Launch: What are some tips for starting and using this routine?

Begin with something “on the table”—an object like a cup or a compass, a document like a poem, a picture, an historical event, a scientific theory, etc. The first person (this might be the teacher initially) points out an interesting feature of the object: “I notice that.... That’s interesting. Why is it that way?” or “Why did it happen that way?” (or some similar why question). The other people in the group try to answer the question or at least to propose possible explanations and reasons. As these students share their ideas, the person asking the original question follows up by asking, “What makes you think so?” The group works together to build explanations rather than merely deferring to an outside source, the teacher or a textbook, to provide an answer.

Student questions and explanations become visible to the class as they are shared. Responses to the routine also can be written down and recorded so that there is a class list of evolving ideas. A few key issues or puzzles might then be chosen for further investigations. A conversation could also be recorded as a chart with four columns representing the key structures of the conversation: 1) the *Observation* that is initially made, 2) the *Question* that comes out of that observation, 3) the various *Explanations/Hypotheses* that the rest of group puts forth, 4) the *Reasons/Justifications* that are given in support of the explanations.