

Interview with Joseph Jelen
Montgomery County History Teacher
FDR Fireside Chats

1. Classroom Practice (2:29)

I wanted them to sort of grapple with the context of the Fireside Chat and really think about what was happening then and how that was influencing what FDR was going to talk about, and think about the uncertainty that surrounded 1935. And so what I had students do was actually to visualize that and to draw what that looked like to them, during their warm-up contextualization exercise.

They—I feel that students too often think of FDR as a savior and think of the New Deal as without critics. And I think that too often people believe that everyone was onboard with the New Deal, when the reality was that people had their doubts and people still had their nagging concerns about whether the New Deal plan would work.

They've read in the textbook about FDR at this point. They know about the Fireside Chats; they know a lot about the Great Depression and the causes of the Great Depression. This is getting towards the end of the unit on FDR, looking at how FDR is trying to convince the people that his plan is going to change the course of the country and bring the country out of the deep, deep recession that it was in.

[Classroom interaction visual]

It was nice to have students listen to FDR's voice and give kids a good sense of the year 1935, thinking about what listening to a radio would have been like and think about how FDR used his voice and used tone and used his reassuring metaphors to really capture his audience.

2. Warm-up Activity (1:15)

The next step was to have students then draw or label some of the uncertainties or what they were concerned about in the year 1935.

[Classroom interaction visual]

And this one student draws a picture of a family listening to the radio. Around this picture he's worried about money, this family is worried about unemployment, family, poverty, jobs, death, homelessness, food. So they're really they are getting the context and they were really thinking about what it would have been like to listen to the radio at the time.

I did notice that one student who had, he had drawn a homeless family that was pressed up against a shop window. Listening to the radio at a shop, instead of listening to this at home, which of course is again really capturing some of the contexts of the time, and I was excited to see him draw that.

3. Listening Activity (2:34)

And as students listened to that first part of the speech, there was a 'during' listening activity where they were to answer three questions. Looking at the questions were designed to have students look at the tone and look more specifically at FDR's text of what he was saying.

We went into sort of a group discussion about how the speech captured, and how FDR used metaphors to capture America's attention and how that was important to getting his New Deal programs through.

[Classroom interaction visual]

And I was pointing out to students that it was important that none of FDR's New Deal legislation could have been passed without Congress' support and their voting for his legislation. And so how now he's using the people of the United States to influence their Congress people, tell them to push through FDR's legislation.

4. FDR's Critics (2:21)

Following our warm up activity, we then launched into looking at some of the criticisms of FDR,

[Classroom interaction visual]

and each student was assigned a particular critic of the New Deal. They were first asked to read about that critic, read the biography of the critic and look at, on the back, look at the primary source that was associated with this critic and the New Deal.

[08:55] And the reason I did that I really wanted students to focus, to imagine themselves as this critic, get inside that person's head and really look closely at FDR's text.

[Classroom interaction visual]

And I didn't want them to see the bigger picture but, rather dissecting FDR's Fireside Chat into these four segments, where he's talking about the big picture in the first section. He's talking about social security, and he's talking about the Relief Acts that he's proposing, etc., on the third and fourth section.

5. Becoming the Critics (2:09)

Finally, as a group, they presented that to the class. Each of them were asked to speak of course to their section and they presented that to the class. While the class mean while was taking notes on a capture sheet that detailed where they were to detail which arguments each of the critics were standing up and making.

A lot of the students write about FDR not doing enough. This student took the *World's* of Norman Thomas writes "what progress is this legislation making?"

[Classroom interaction visual]

And of course he is going to spend time at Hyde Park or Warm Springs. Interesting that students related to that.

[Classroom interaction visual]

I am happy that the student is seeing what Norman Thomas is interested in. And the idea of nationalizing industry that Norman Thomas has, and trying to get rid of any monopolies. The student who was assigned Charles Coughlin says:

[Classroom visual interaction]

Charles Coughlin of course uses a lot of charged language in his rhetoric and the student too is capturing some of that.

6. Lesson Wrap-up (2:32)

Finally, at the end of class, we were asked—I asked students to rank which of those arguments they felt had the most merit, given that context of 1935, and given the concerns that the people of 1935 had,

[Classroom interaction visual]

And finally, for homework, students were asked to write an essay response dealing with the New Deal criticisms and dealing with the supports that FDR is giving in his speech and trying to sort of weigh which is whether the New Deal was indeed a success. Was it perhaps not as successful as they had originally thought, and perhaps could it have done more?

7. Engaging Students (2:02)

I was really hoping that students took away some knowledge of the criticisms that FDR was receiving. They knew that Republicans were largely against New Deal legislation, but they weren't as familiar with some of the more Left Wing criticism, the Socialist criticism, the Communist criticism, the American Liberty League criticism of FDR.

On the other it was important for students to do something with the document, and I felt that by taking the role of critics of FDR's speech, they're really having to read more in-depth and read more closely what FDR is saying in his Fireside Chat, and really try to pick apart some of the more nuanced pieces. And so after they read about their critic, they could ask each other questions about Norman Thomas or about Upton Sinclair and really get a sense of, okay, bounce some ideas off of each other. And then it allowed them to come up with a more cohesive speech as they reflect on their critic and they reflect on what FDR is saying. It really provided for students to help each other out.

It's nice to try to turn over student learning to them and allow them to run with things. I think that one of the things that I really liked about the lesson was that students were asked to be

creative and to play the role of a critic and get up on stage in front of the class and pretend to be that critic. To really engage in not only, you know, thinking of history as this stagnant thing, but make it interesting and make it fun. And I think that students were able to do that through working in groups and playing the role of one of these critics.

Improving the Lesson (1:43)

It seemed that students really struggled with their primary sources of their critics and struggled with understanding who their critic was. I'm not sure if in the future I might give them more detailed information maybe to read about the critic for homework prior to class, or to give them perhaps a more extensive primary source or find some materials that really relate more specifically to Social Security. Or maybe in the future having students listen to Huey Long and to listen to Father Coughlin would be beneficial to better understanding how these gentlemen reacted and really engaged the American public in criticizing FDR's programs.

I would try to align FDR's speech and what he's talking about in those various sections more closely with the criticisms and perhaps change it so that maybe one group is only going to attack one section of FDR's speech, but do it from various critics standpoints. So, if Huey Long were going to attack the first part of FDR's speech and have Upton Sinclair attack that same part of the speech, that way students were focused on one part of the speech rather than jumping around.

Using Primary Sources (1:45)

So these students at this point have become very familiar with using primary sources. They, of course, have been trained at this point to recognize what is that stated information that's in the document that they can seize on. And also think about some of the inferred information, think about what isn't being said literally in the text, but what is FDR inferring, or what can they infer from what FDR is saying. I know that students, without my even prompting that, knew, knew to look for his tone and look for who his audience was. I have students really examine primary sources looking first at what's being said, and then second looking at what they can infer from the text.

Who's the author? Who is writing this? Why are they writing this? Who's the audience? Why is the audience important to understanding the context of this document? What's the tone? Who is—who's the speaker, and why is that important? So, over time, students develop this repertoire of questions that they ask of documents.

And then you build students to think about the more broad things dealing with a document, to think about the context, to think about the reasons why this document was written, or who the audience is and why that's important, and really expand upon the context of the document to give them a better understanding.