Optical Illusions “Helping” Activity

Essential Question: How do we help? What are some strategies for supporting others’ learning?

Goal: Students will articulate and experience our four helping strategies: asking questions, showing how to do a little bit, using resources (materials and one’s smart brain), celebrating and using encouraging words.

Task: Each student is tasked with helping a partner see two pictures in an “ambiguous image.”

Materials: handouts (see link)

Steps:

1. Introduce the essential question. To figure out an answer, students will participate in a “thinking activity.” Although the activity won’t be exactly like real life, explain that it might help them answer the question.
2. Describe the task. Acknowledge its difficulty but challenge students to make their best effort. Emphasize that students are expected to guide their partner in seeing the two pictures, not simply tell them what they are.
3. Model the task using the four helping strategies. Show the class an image and begin by asking questions (e.g. what can you see? what is confusing?). Show how to do a little bit by pointing out a part of each picture, and see if students can fill in the rest. If necessary, use markers to draw an outline of each picture in the ambiguous image. As students work to interpret the ambiguous image, praise their efforts and celebrate success. As you demonstrate the helping strategies, record them on a visual aid.
4. Explain that it’s now the students turn to practice the helping strategies. Divide students into pairs, and ask them to label themselves A and B.
5. First, invite all of the As to join you while Bs work on another activity (e.g. independent reading). Show them 1-2 ambiguous images that they will be helping their partner to interpret. As before, use the strategies to help students see both pictures in the ambiguous image. Time permitting, ask how they plan to help their partner see both of the pictures.
6. Next, invite all of the Bs to join you while As work on another activity (e.g. independent reading). Repeat step 5 with 1-2 different ambiguous images. (If you work with another adult, you may call the As and Bs simultaneously.)
7. Direct students to return to their partners, and distribute the first ambiguous image. One partner will be able to see both pictures in the image and should help their partner to do the same. Again, emphasize that students are expected to guide their partner using the helping strategies, not simply identify the two pictures.
8. Distribute a new ambiguous image, prompting students to reverse their roles, and repeat step 7.
9. Repeat step 8 for two more rounds.
10. As appropriate, stop the class to highlight the four helping strategies.
11. Reconvene as a class, and summarize the four helping strategies.
12. Reflect on the experience. Some possible questions:
    * When you first looked at the image, could you see both pictures?
    * Did your partner help you? If so, how?
    * What helping strategies did you or your partner use?
    * How might you use these strategies to help someone do something else, like math or soccer?