

Teaching a Thematic Unit Using Cooperative Learning And Multiple Intelligence Theory

BY ANITA OLIVER

Cooperative learning and thematic teaching can be combined to produce engaging and challenging units. This form of cooperative learning has been developed from two forms of instruction: Group Investigation¹ and Literature-Based Instruction. This article will illustrate how to assemble a cooperative learning thematic unit based on the multiple intelligences theory of Howard Gardner. The unit can be adapted for elementary or secondary instruction.

Group investigation has been rigorously tested in a variety of settings. It has proved to be an effective teaching strategy. Using this technique, students actively participate in developing their own instructional unit. The teacher and students decide together what they will study and how they will research, plan, and present the unit. It is an intellectually invigorating experience for both students and teachers.

Literature-Based Instruction is exactly what the name implies— instruction based on one or more pieces of literature. It can also be based on a concept around which a number of pieces of literature are gathered.

The teacher chooses an excellent piece of literature around which to build a thematic unit. It can be a trade book, a topic book chosen for its match with the required curriculum in some subject area, or a textbook. For instance, the teacher might choose *Johnny Tremain* to coincide with teaching about the U.S. Revolutionary War in Social Studies. By choosing literature that meshes well

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with a required textbook, the teacher helps students make connections between fact-based material and a story that brings the time period to life.

From observation in classrooms, conversations with teachers and administrators, and personal experience using Group Investi-

gations with elementary and middle school students, I have concluded that some people are uncomfortable with the amount of freedom students have in Group Investigation. Therefore, I have modified the approach to incorporate some of the excellent things about Literature-Based Instruction with Group Investigation. The unit discussed here is based on the theory of Multiple Intelligences or the Seven Intelligences.

Seven Intelligences

Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences is based on the premise that there is not just one kind of intelligence as found by an IQ test: instead, there are multiple intelligences. Gardner has identified seven²: linguistic, logical/mathematical, bodily/kinesthetic, spatial/visual, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. These are not learning styles as we generally think of them; rather, they are ways of being smart. When selecting groups for students to work in, it is good to include children with different types of strengths so that each complements and strengthens the others.³ For instance, a mathematically smart student could work with an artistic student and a linguistic student.

The thematic unit should be built with the teacher and students planning together. They begin with the seven intelligences and plan activities to fit their topic of study. For instance, a class might choose Middle Eastern events, cultures, and people. As the unit begins, students and teacher will need to look at the big picture and decide in a broad sense what they want to learn.

When I used this unit, each student or group of students chose a Middle Eastern country on which they became an authority. Then, by listening to other presentations and making one themselves, the students learned about the various countries. Three or four students is a good size for a cooperative group of this nature. Students may choose to study one country each or the group could choose to work together on a country.

In planning a unit, the teacher and students should keep in mind the seven intelligences and seek ways to use all of them in the learning. The first intelligence is linguistic, which is familiar to educators, since nearly all of American educa-

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tion is built upon linguistic intelligence.

The activities in this area will cover many skills students already have—for example, reading, writing, spelling, research, speaking, writing plays, role

opportunity for students to use the other six intelligences while not neglecting linguistic intelligence, since it is critical for success in school.

Some suggested linguistic activities for students to consider doing are as follows: writing an imaginary letter from a woman to her husband or son who has gone to war with a neighboring country; writing a story about a child the students' age who lives in their chosen country; researching the history of the country; writing a poem using hieroglyphics; writing and directing a play about a country or event; learning to speak simple Arabic

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playing, and related skills. Since not all students are comfortable with linguistic intelligence as their primary method of learning, teachers should provide ample

words; planning an archeological dig on the playground; writing a readers theatre production⁴; and inviting an archeologist to speak to the class.

- Eastern class for a day;
- Plan a Middle Eastern meal and invite parents; or
- Build models of Middle Eastern buildings.

Spatial/Visual

Spatial/Visual learners do well in art and graphic design. These students need to be able to find links between art and other aspects of learning.

All cultures have fascinating forms of art, and Middle Eastern art is no exception. Students can learn forms of art based on symbolism that develops their understanding of Middle Eastern cultures. One art form I have used successfully is making copies of Middle Eastern pottery, such as juglets and lamps like the ones the 10 virgins carried. Students also like to build ancient villages, or copies of shrines or landmarks. Sculpting or making a plaster of paris replica of Petra opens worlds of ideas and understandings for students. Painting on papyrus is still done in Egypt, and students can learn much from making paper to paint on and researching objects to paint.

Students can also develop multimedia presentations using computer programs. This form of learning presentation can involve several of the intelligences—musical, spatial, mathematical, and interpersonal.

The music of the Middle East offers richness, especially to the musically intelligent student. CDs, tapes, and videos of traditional Middle Eastern music will delight students interested in music. Students can also make or learn to play some kinds of Middle Eastern musical instruments. Learning to sing Middle Eastern folk songs teaches students about the culture and thought that influenced the origins of the music. Students can write songs based on their study and perform them at the Middle Eastern meal.

Interpersonal

Students with interpersonal intelligence like to work with others. Cooperative learning methods are excellent for these students. Some suggestions for working with others are as follows:

- Research the history of the country of choice;
- Organize a group to study aviation

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Logical/Mathematical

The second intelligence is logical/mathematical. The mathematical part of this intelligence is familiar to educators. But other forms of logic should also be explored. These often begin with the question “Why?” or ask students to compare and contrast. For example:

- Why did the United States feel it was necessary to defend Kuwait?
- Why did Jordan decide to sign a peace accord with Israel?
- Compare and contrast the experiences of the soldiers helping Kuwait with those of the French helping the Americans during the Revolutionary War.
- Study the development of the Arabic calendar and make a copy for one year.
- Compare and contrast the energy in one missile used against Iraq with the

energy in a thunderstorm.

These and numerous other questions can be researched, analyzed, and written or presented in an organized fashion.

Bodily/Kinesthetic

Bodily/kinesthetic is the third intelligence. Students who are strong in this area like to do hands-on activities. By combining their interests in active pursuits with ideas and facts they need to learn, the teacher can help them understand the importance of more traditional methods. Students interested in motion activities could do the following:

- Research Middle Eastern sports and games and plan a sporting day when only Middle Eastern games are played;
- Study videos or books about Middle Eastern classrooms and teach a Middle

during the Gulf War;

- With three friends, write a play about the country and act it out in class.

Intrapersonal Intelligence

Intrapersonal people like to work alone. They are comfortable when doing activities they have thought up by themselves. There are a lot of activities in school for intrapersonal people. They might do the following:

- Write a diary about a student in their country of study and tell about his or her experiences.
- Think about what it is like to live in a Middle Eastern family and write a story about it.
- Research the religions of the Middle East and compare them with one another.

These are only a few of the ideas to get you started. You can have children collect things, make films, write books, build dioramas, construct relief maps, build models of monuments, make a collection of all their class writings, plan an art show, bring in people from the Middle East to talk about their homelands, go to museums, make a video, or do any of hundreds of other ideas. You can prepare some of your own games, activities, worksheets, and guidelines for activities.

At the end of the unit, each group or individual should make a final presentation to demonstrate acquired knowledge about the chosen country. As you plan activities and evaluation for the various intelligences, keep in mind that being strong in one area doesn't mean that only that area should be used for learning. Rather, through using that strength, other intelligences can become strong.

Evaluation

There are several ways to evaluate a thematic or multiple intelligence cooperative learning unit. You can set criteria at the beginning for projects. Such criteria should measure what the students learn, the quality of the projects, and the quality of the cooperative learning activities. It is important to focus on the learning that took place during the cooperative projects. Teachers and students can each prepare questions from the final presentations of the units, which will be studied and used for a final test.

At the beginning of the unit, students

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and teachers can sign contracts that include student participation in cooperative learning activities, specific tasks to be accomplished, or other items teacher and students deem important. During the study, building, and learning processes of the unit, the teacher must constantly interact with students: guiding them in their research, serving as a resource person as they do their projects, working together, and giving feedback about the quality of the work as well as encouragement for continued growth. Students should also evaluate their own work and progress dur-

ing and at the end of the unit.

Cooperative learning using literature-based units can be rewarding for both teacher and students. Everyone learns and everyone participates. As a result, students gain greater knowledge and understanding. ✍️

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