

The Big Myth: An Animated CD-Rom and Website on World Religions and Ancient Cultures

Name of organisation:
Distant Train

THE BIG MYTH: TEACHER'S GUIDE

Interaction

When one thinks about interaction in educational settings where computers are in use, one tends to assume that the interaction taking place is between the computer and the person working at the computer. An assignment appears on the screen. Subsequently, the person watching the screen responds to the question and discovers from the screen whether his or her reply was correct or incorrect. Interaction refers to much more than this in *The Big Myth*. Assignments can only be completed if students work together, and the presentation of results occurs in front of the class or they are communicated to students at other schools (in principle anywhere in the world). The computer provides the "input" for a learning process, and offers the opportunity to present results via internet. But the actual learning process takes place when students are engaged in discussion with each other, when they are solving problems and when they are preparing a presentation. In this manner, *The Big Myth* fits into the tradition of cooperative learning.

Organization

The Big Myth has been designed for lessons in which students can work in groups of 3-5 persons. The assignments are best completed through the cooperation of these group members with each other.

Materials

Each group has a computer with internet access at its disposal. There are sufficient other materials in the classroom (such as crayons, paper, sheets, simple musical instruments, glue, scissors, cardboard, costumes). The students should also have access to a library or a media center.

Group roles

The teacher creates the groups for each The Big Myth session, and assigns various roles and tasks. These roles and tasks can be assigned and labeled as follows:

Facilitator/ Team Captain

- Makes sure that everybody understands the task
- Makes sure that everybody in the group participates, and also, for instance, that the person using the computer does not "surf" independently of the others
- Represents the group if it has a question for the teacher.

Reporter/ Director

- Organizes the group presentation
- Makes sure that the group works on time, and according to plan

Material manager

- Makes sure that the group gets all the materials it needs (including computer print outs)
- Makes sure that all the materials are cleaned up after the assignment has been completed (this does not mean that this person needs to clean up everything him/herself but that he/she organizes this activity)
- If relevant, this person fills out the group questionnaires or work sheets

Information manager

- Finds all the information necessary to complete the assignment
- Works with the computer and the printer Mediator/Negotiator
- Makes sure that there is a positive atmosphere in the group
- Mediates in case of conflicts or disagreements

These tasks can be assigned differently for groups of four, for instance by giving the mediation task to the facilitator.

The Classroom Assignments

There are three types of assignments that are associated with each myth:

1. A-assignments are aimed at information processing. The main goal is to be able to make links between the myth, on the one hand, and the corresponding culture and religion (pantheon), on the other hand.
2. B-assignments are aimed at preparing classroom presentations. They have been created in such a way that it is clear that the myth has been understood within the context of culture.
3. C-assignments are aimed at individual reflection concerning what the students have learned, as well as suggestions for further activities.

Teacher's role

Traditionally it is the teacher that transfers knowledge. He/she is the most important source of information. In The Big Myth all the information the students will need can be found on the website and the internet. This gives the teacher much more time to observe the learning processes that are taking place among the students and to assess what is being accomplished by groups and individuals. Within the philosophy associated with Complex Instruction it is important that students are appreciated for what they **can** do, and to express this appreciation (positive feedback). The aim is to increase the status (trust in each other's capabilities) of students and their self-esteem. Within the framework of The Big Myth the teacher assumes the following roles:

Preparing the lessons

Before the first actual lesson the teacher makes it clear to the students what the objective of the lessons is: to study and compare a variety of creation myths and cultures (this can take place within the framework of subject areas such as creative writing, literature, religious education, history, language studies and "integrated culture education").

During this introduction the teacher refers to the "big idea": "How do people from different cultures view themselves, the world, and their origin".

We would also like to suggest that the students look at site itself in order to familiarize the students with the structure of the site.

We suggest that the content of the first assignment should be to ask the students the following:

- What story or stories do you know about the creation of the world and human beings?
- Where does this story (or stories) come from?
- In groups, working together, try to complete these stories as much as possible. make sure that the following questions are addressed while doing this:
 - What was present "in the beginning"?
 - What did the world look like?
 - What happened next?
 - Who were the first people?

- What is their relationship to the creator (or creators) of the world and humans, and what is the creator's (or creators') relationship to them?

Once the various groups have been able to reconstruct one or more creation stories they can share their findings with the rest of the classroom. They can also compare their stories to written texts if available (often this will be the Old Testament in Europe and in the United States).

Preparing each lesson

1. Group roles and individual tasks

This can take place by hanging up a large sheet of paper in a visible spot in the classroom. The sheet lists the various group roles and the tasks of group members. For instance:

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
Facilitator					
Reporter					
Material					
Information					
Negotiator					

2. Preparing the orientation

In Complex Instruction, which this series of lessons is based on, each lesson begins with an orientation. The goal of the orientation is to:

- To introduce the topic of the lesson, and/or to refer to what was covered in the previous lesson
- To discuss the assignments with each other in order to assess what skills are necessary to complete the assignments. The teacher also emphasizes that students need to cooperate since nobody has all of the skills mentioned, but that by working together the students can accomplish a great deal.
- To talk about the tasks that the students have been assigned, based (among other things) on the experiences from previous lessons.

Teaching the Big Myth

This implies:

- Giving the orientation
- Helping the students to start and complete their assignments
- To allow for the presentations to take place

During the groupwork the teacher is especially:

1. Organizer and manager

The teacher is responsible for creating the composition of the groups and the distribution of tasks. Subsequently, the teacher delegates responsibility to the groups. In other words, the teacher makes sure that everybody sticks to his/her role.

Examples:

- The teacher makes sure that a question posed by the facilitator is indeed the group's question.

- If uncertainty exists regarding the assignment the teacher initially asks the facilitator to attempt to clarify the instructions.
- The teacher makes sure that only the material manager collects the materials. The material manager is held responsible for these materials.
- Time management and planning issues are discussed only with the reporter.
- If there is too much disagreement or tension then the teacher will approach the mediator.

2. Catalyst

Of course, the teacher is responsible for helping groups that get stuck or fail to function properly. When difficult questions arise the teacher does not provide ready-made answers, but instead asks questions that get the group back on track.

3. Observer (watching what the groups are doing right)

It is important in Complex Instruction that the teacher responds to what groups and individuals do well. This means closely observing what is taking place in each group.

4. Evaluator (giving feedback)

The teacher responds to the behavior of the students, based on what is observed. This can occur during the group work, but also during the presentation. The feedback is concrete and based on a description of what has been observed.

During and after the presentations

The teacher especially fulfills the function of evaluator here, both of the process (based on his/her observations during the groupwork and on the experiences of the students) and the content.

At the end of each lesson the teacher tells the students what will be discussed in the next lesson (which will be relevant again during the orientation that takes place in that next lesson).

Follow-up

After a number of lessons, in which the students have worked with the various exercises, students can be asked to compare the various myths that they have studied, in order to look at similarities and differences.

Another option is to ask the students to write their own myth and to mail this to the project webmaster, to read the myths of other students or to start a discussion about their views and experiences with students from other schools (in the chatroom).

References/Further reading

Batelaan, P. & Van Hoof, C. (1996) Cooperative learning in Intercultural Education. European Journal of Intercultural Studies, Volume 7, nr 3.

Batelaan, P. & Van Hoof, C. (1998) Leren respecteren. Utrecht: APS.

Cohen, E. (1994) Designing Groupwork. Strategies for the heterogeneous classroom. New York: Teachers College Press.

Gardner, H. (1993) Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences. (10th anniversary edition) New York: Basic Books.

Johnson, D. & Johnson, R. (1991) Learning together and alone: Cooperative competition and individualization. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Slavin, R. (1985) Cooperative Learning: Applying contact theory in desegregated schools. Journal of Social Issues. Vol. 41, nr. 3.