A project approach using integration and collaboration to study ancient civilizations in sixth grade

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A project approach using integration and collaboration to study ancient civilizations in sixth grade

Abstract
The purpose of this article is to describe a 6th grade project intended to build responsibility in students for their own learning and develop an integration of curriculum areas through the study of Ancient Civilizations. Within this project, 6th grade students were involved in a research project with the final production of an ancient civilizations museum where they shared their knowledge and taught other students about their chosen civilization.
A PROJECT APPROACH USING INTEGRATION AND COLLABORATION

TO STUDY ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS IN SIXTH GRADE

A Graduate Journal Paper

Submitted to the

Division of Reading and Language Arts

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Kim Marie Nadermann Kerian
This research paper by: Kim Marie Nadermann Kerian

Titled: A Project Approach Using Integration and Collaboration to Study Ancient Civilization in Sixth Grade has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the Degree of Masters of Arts in Education.

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Dale D. Johnson
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Robert Muffoletto
Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
April 3, 1998

Editors
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
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Dear Editors,

Enclosed please find four copies of the manuscript "A project approach using integration and collaboration to study ancient civilizations," which I am requesting you consider for publication in the Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy. This manuscript is an original work and has not been simultaneously submitted to any other publication outlet.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

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A Project Approach Using Integration and Collaboration to Study Ancient Civilizations

Rationale

The purpose of this article is to describe a 6th grade project intended to build responsibility in students for their own learning and develop an integration of curriculum areas through the study of Ancient Civilizations. Within this project, 6th grade students were involved in a
research project with the final production of an ancient civilizations museum where they shared their knowledge and taught other students about their chosen civilization.

Related Research

According to Cora Lee Five and Marie Dionision in their book *Bridging the Gap: Integrating Curriculum in Upper Elementary and Middle School*, the concept of making learning whole has affected language arts instruction for many years (1996). Ken Goodman (1986) stated that, "If language is learned best and easiest when it is whole and in natural contexts, then integration is a key principle for language development and learning through language" (30).

When planning for this integrated theme, my team and I felt it was valuable for the students to "walk in the time of the event" as Dorothy Heathcote stated in her 1983 article (695). Using a broad theme such as Ancient Civilizations, students were allowed to choose and use a wide range of activities and choices which enabled students with varied abilities to work together in small groups. Five and Dionision look at this as creating "communities of learners" (1996, 9). They feel the concept of integration relies upon the classroom as a community of learners in which teachers and students work together to explore their own questions across disciplines.

In her book *Literacy in the 21st Century: A Balanced Approach* (1997), Gail Tompkins discussed how theme studies and learning across the curriculum help students build their literacy competencies. During a
theme study, students use listening, reading, and writing as they learn, and they share what they have learned through books they write, presentations they give, and displays they create (Tompkins, 1997). Tompkins also states that when students are involved in planning activities, take responsibility for their own learning, and cooperate with classmates on projects, theme studies are successful with all students and they discipline themselves because they want to be part of the learning community. She believes that "one of the most important outcomes of theme studies is that students gain self-confidence because they are motivated to learn and apply what they are learning, and this confidence breeds success" (1997, 33).

In 1986 Thais identified three benefits students have from relating experiences and integrating across the curriculum:

1. Students understand and remember better when they use reading and writing to explore what they are learning.
2. Students' literacy learning is reinforced when they read and write about what they are learning.
3. Students learn best through active involvement, collaborative projects, and interaction with classmates, the teacher, and the world. (Tompkins, 1997).

Tompkins also looked at why some students are not as motivated as others in her 1997 book. She found that the type of activities done in a classroom does affect students' motivation. Tompkins makes reference to Turner and Paris's (1995) study of activities and found that students' motivation was determined by daily classroom activities. "They found
that open-ended activities and projects in which students were in control of the process they used and the projects they created were most successful. Open-ended activities involve choice, challenge, control, collaboration, constructing meaning, and consequence" (1997, 57).

In 1993 Richard Beach looked at reader response theories and how social theories of response reflect that idea that creating a classroom as a social community fosters students expression and exploration of responses. A quiet student who says little or nothing in class, may take a different role in a collaborated project and come alive now that it is safe to differentiate from his or her usual role (Beach, 1993). Through this integrated theme we hoped that students would take some control in their learning and "pursue some of their own inquiry questions" (Harste, 1993).

Planning and Preparation

Through the team work of three 6th grade teachers, a project was conceptualized and developed to encourage the students to have choice and be responsible for their learning as well as transmitting their knowledge to other 6th grade students. We, three sixth grade teachers, wanted to do more team-teaching to integrate our ideas and objectives revolving around the theme of Ancient Civilizations. Our curriculum includes the study of Ancient Egypt as one of our literature themes as well as being a unit in history. Ancient Rome and Ancient Greece are also included in the history curriculum. Instead of focusing on these themes in isolated curriculum areas, we focused on studying ancient civilizations as one integrated unit.
One month before school started in August, three of us met several times to establish and develop procedures, goals, and activities which we felt would enhance motivation in learners. We believed we could develop this motivation if we integrated our curriculums and developed activities through team teaching. Our first tasks were to find a time in which we could work with sixth grade students simultaneously in all three classrooms, with the ability to move from one room to the other and have enough time to work with students from the other homerooms. At the time, we had three homerooms of sixth grade students with whom we wanted to work. There were 75 6th grade students, including 6 students mainstreamed from a self-contained special education classroom.

We collected the resources we had and reviewed them for ideas. The year before, a member of my team and I had been involved in a successful activity in which students researched a famous person from the past and role played that character in a small production as a way of sharing their knowledge. We questioned if the same type of activity, or something similar, would work in studying ancient civilizations.

It was then decided to create an Ancient Civilization museum through which the students produced and shared their knowledge with others. Students would do research through various sources and create visuals such as posters, costumes and models of different types to portray and teach the other students about their findings.

Scheduling and work time became a consideration. Due to special schedules and other curriculum areas we needed to continue, we arranged our schedules so that Monday afternoons would be set aside for 6th grade
Two and a half hours would be allocated as a time when the three of us could team teach and give the students time to work on this project. We needed to decide how to effectively work with 75 6th grade students in an organized way and what we would do Tuesday through Friday in our separate teaching.

Focusing on the importance of integration, we continued with other activities connecting to the theme of Ancient Civilizations but not the ones on which the students would be working in the group project. For example, *The Egypt Game* (Snyder, 1967), a story of a group of sixth grade students who enjoy artifacts from Ancient Egypt and develop a game they play in an abandoned storage shed, was read during the time when students were involved in literature activities. Students studied Greek and Roman gods and goddesses to gain background on mythology and then wrote their own mythological stories. Various other ancient civilizations, such as Ancient China and Ancient Mesopotamia were studied Tuesday through Friday during original History/Social Studies times. Roman numerals were taught in math. Various activities involving fossilization and mummification were taught in science. Students mummified Cornish hens during science to better understand mummification.

Our Social Studies curricula contains the themes of Ancient Egypt, Ancient Rome, and Ancient Greece. My teammates and I each took one of the ancient civilization areas to facilitate students' work. In the end, our individual classrooms were areas where students created their museums: Ancient Rome, Ancient Egypt, and Ancient Greece. Before beginning and introducing this project to students, we had studied our given...
civilizations to decide the important areas we felt students needed to consider in their museum and that all three civilizations had in common. Five areas were determined: geography, history and government, architecture and art, religion, and other accomplishments. All were to be presented in some way in each museum.

Student Work and Involvement

As an full-group introductory activity, students were involved in a K-W-L (Gillet and Temple, 1990) chart activity focusing on what they knew about ancient civilizations and what they wanted to know. Not to our surprise, many students knew a lot about Ancient Egypt but not as much about Ancient Rome and Ancient Greece. Students then wrote down their choice of civilization to study and ranked them according to their choice. It worked out so that each person received their first or second choice.

The first Monday of the Ancient Civilization project was held with all sixth grade students meeting in one location. The music room worked great because of the size needed to house 75 students. We teachers decided to introduce this activity in a motivating way. We each did an activity or skit pertaining to one of the civilizations. To encourage the students, my team dressed in " togas", were barefoot, and used sash wraps to set the stage. To begin, one of the teachers performed a short choral reading skit that related to Greek theatre. The second team teacher then read a short activity decoding hieroglyphics for Egypt, this was followed by a short play called "The Ghost of Pompeii" for Ancient Rome performed
by the team of teachers.

The activity and schedule of using Mondays for sixth grade group work was initiated. Before beginning and separating into our "civilization" groups, the assessment rubric (see Appendix) for the ending objective was shared and questioned students had were answered. Students were told of their civilization group and were led to that particular classroom by one of the team teachers.

Due to the fact that the students needed some initial background information to decide what their part would be in the making of the Ancient Civilization museum, we decided that our Social Studies book would be a great place to start. The students were guided through the relevant chapters in our Social Studies text. This continued into the next week.

After completing the guided reading, the students listed what they felt were the main areas of their civilizations. They were determined to be as followed:

**ROME**
- Roman people and lifestyle
- Government and Geography
- Wars
- Famous Romans
- Entertainment and Architecture
- Miscellaneous (Pompeii, Christianity, and Roman Language)

**GREECE**
- city-state
- Athens and buildings
- Literature
- Wars
- Democracy
- Miscellaneous (Olympics, Alphabet, Philosophies)
At this point, the third Monday of the activity, the students were allowed to choose what area they wanted to research. Each student chose two or three areas. Small groups of three of four were determined by the teacher, and the research began.

Using only Monday afternoons as time to work on this project, the students used a variety of resources to gain information pertaining to their topic area and took notes. While books, magazines, and encyclopedias were encouraged, the Internet and various other multimedia resources, including CD-Roms and videos, were also used. Each ancient civilization group, Romans, Greeks, and Egyptians, rotated through the Internet computer lab researching for information. We teachers were facilitators and monitors, but the students enthusiastically did the work. This type of research continued for three additional Mondays. Students were encouraged to find outside resources to help their presentations also.

When the students were concluding their research, they brainstormed how best to present their information and create a museum in the classrooms for each civilization. All the students and teachers met again in the music room. Ideas were brainstormed as to how to best present information to an audience. Students were encouraged to work
with their small group to decide what visual aids to use for their topics. Developing posters was a common idea, but the use of costumes, props, and large refrigerator boxes for stage development were also shared.

To move the project along students used a whole week of daily Social Studies time to work on props and resources for the museum. A layout was also created in each classroom showing where small groups would stand and how best to organize the information areas. Each room was set up "in the round", and audience members sat in the middle of the classroom with booths and various visual aids set up around the outside. Signs were made to present the different categorical areas in the museum.

The day of the Ancient Civilizations museum opening approached. Each civilization group was responsible for teaching the other 6th grade students about their topic as if they were the experts in the area. Letters had been previously sent home to parents inviting them to this trip back in time. Costumes and props were set and students ready. The students rotated through the different civilizations, presenting when needed and listening to the great things the other students had to share.

While presenting their knowledge, the students were also being graded by the team of teachers. Using a rubric developed for this particular activity, each teacher individually ranked the students during their presentations and then met at the end of the day to compare comments and rankings or grades.
Student Activities

A group of students who researched the different wars of Greece. They carried shields, made masks, held swords, and created various posters or visuals to share their findings.

A recreation of the Greek market place of Agora. This student used a box as a shelf to display things that a person could purchase such as clothing, pottery, and food.
A group of students researched and presented information about the rulers of Rome. These students dressed in costume, made timelines, presentation boxes, and other visuals to share their findings.

A group of students researched the various pharoahs and rulers of Egypt. They wrapped sheets around themselves for costumes and created posters of the pharoahs.
**Reflections**

Students were surveyed and interviewed following the activity to hear their feelings, likes, and dislikes. The large majority of the students expressed that they enjoyed this type of activity. Their reasons included having a chance to work with peers in different homerooms, the choice to study the area they found interesting, having one whole afternoon to work together with others, and having been given the chance to make major decisions about what they would study, how they would go about it, and what ways they would share their knowledge. A lot of students stated that they liked teaching their peers and assuming a new role as an expert.

The only concern expressed by a few students was in reference to working two and a half hours straight on a project. Group dynamics or work habits may have played a part in this. This was also something the teaching team noticed by the fourth week. Two and a half hours did get to be too long when researching. It was nice to have the transition time of working on the Internet and back to other resources, but we noticed that the last half hour did get fairly long.

A recommendation we would make for those interested in this activity would be to give your small groups a set amount of time for their presentations. Some small groups in a particular civilization could go on for a lengthy amount of time eventually losing the attention of their audience. We suggest the small groups be limited to a five to seven minute time allotment for the small group presentation in the museum.

We found it very beneficial to have set aside a Monday afternoon for
all of the sixth grade students to work together. Just as we needed time to investigate, discuss, explore and share our suggestions and ideas for planning, the students also needed time for similar reasons. As Five and Dionision found (1996), we both needed someone to share our discoveries and frustrations, as well as to have time ownership of our work.

A third area we felt was needed and beneficial was planning and teaming together as teachers both before the integrated activity took place and after it was started. While the task of finding the time to meet and plan together was sometimes difficult, it was a time that was very well spent. After starting the activity, we would try to meet before or after school at least once a week to discuss what was accomplished the past Monday and what would be planned for the upcoming Monday. We could not agree more with Marie Dionisio's comment (1996) "When the opportunity for collaboration does not exist, the possibility for integration can seem hopeless" (10).

There were also benefits of having three teachers doing the evaluation. While we each completed a rubric for students as they made their presentations, it was nice to have the time to compare and discuss what we saw. The pace of the museum presentation made it difficult to catch everything and jot notes. Therefore, having two other people evaluating the same presentation and sharing our observations helped determine a less subjective grade for each student. We feel next time we would video tape the museum presentations for students to view themselves and evaluate also.
Conclusion

Because of the students involvement in the Ancient Civilization museum and the roles they took on, we believe students built connections and relationships that they may not have reached otherwise. According to J. David Cooper in his article "Literacy, Literature, and Learning for Life", a large part of "real world" learning is motivating and exciting students (1996). By integrating activities across the curriculum and giving students choice in the development of a "real world" activity such as the Ancient Civilization museum, learning to read, write, listen, speak, think, and perceive meaningful situations occurred. The connections were much easier to make. Cooper states in his article that there are four advantages to developing real-world themes and integration:

1. Integration creates higher motivation.
2. Integration allows students to build connections.
3. School learning matches the real world.
4. Natural opportunities to learn strategies and skills are provided.

Along with these benefits for students, collaboration gave the teachers the support we needed when attempting something new in our classrooms. This allowed us to develop a richer learning experience for our students. It was difficult for some teachers to move away from the traditional role of "teacher" and not try to sway students to do things as we wanted them being done. We are sure that we learned from one another as educators and will continue to learn together as a community of
learners with our students.
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Appendix

Rubric Used for Evaluation

Ancient Civilization Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Highly skilled</th>
<th>Moderately skilled</th>
<th>Skilled</th>
<th>Poorly skilled</th>
<th>Unskilled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Presents information as if you are an expert on your topic (weighted x3)

Prepares and uses brief notes which guide the presentation but are not read from. (weighted x2)

Selects or develops and uses visual aids of different types (charts, maps, realia, graphs, photos) (weighted x2)

Uses correct voice (volume, pace, clarity) and body language (eye contact, gestures, and handling of visual aids

Uses correct usage, vocabulary, and sentence structure

Total points out of 90: ___________ Grade _____

Directions: Place a check in the corresponding box of each criteria for evaluation. Add comments or suggestions below.