

# Active Learning in the Geography Classroom

**E**asily influenced by peers and distracted by text messaging and the lure of the latest handheld device, middle school learners can be challenging to reach. A class of middle school students is a highly diverse group of learners with myriad personalities and learning styles. Learners may be enthusiastic today and disengaged tomorrow, conversational one day and sullen the next.



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As you know from experience, a middle school teacher must be fully prepared to engage students each day and flexible enough to change plans at a moment's notice with the shifting classroom dynamic. National Geographic's *World Cultures and Geography* program contains a wealth of teaching options that are perfect for the active teacher—and his or her active students.

## VARIETY AND FLEXIBILITY

An expansive repertoire of proven strategies and appropriate activities provides the best preparation for each day's teaching. The structure of the Student Edition in this program is specifically designed to provide options that engage students in meaningful learning activities. The two-page format of each lesson in a chapter allows for several approaches, including

- selecting lessons and sections that are most appropriate for any given class of learners;
- focusing on one lesson each day to provide a depth of content knowledge;
- using cooperative learning activities that allow students to teach and learn from each other.

In a cooperative learning activity, for example, students can participate in a Jigsaw strategy in which groups of students become experts on one lesson in a chapter. Next, all expert groups switch into new groups with each new group having one “expert” on each lesson. Each expert is then responsible for teaching the others in the group about the lesson. (See *Best Practices for Active Teaching* in the Teacher's Edition for a complete explanation of the Jigsaw strategy.)

Another cooperative learning possibility involves breaking a lesson into segments by subheading. If there are two subheadings, students can work in pairs, with each student reading and learning about information in one segment and then sharing

and discussing with the other. If there are three subheadings, students can work in triads.

You may also consider having students work in pairs or triads to discuss a **Before You Move On** question, an **Ongoing Assessment Lab**, a **Critical Viewing** question, or other text-based features. Experience suggests that each grouping strategy requires practice with students so that they can meet teacher expectations for appropriate conduct while acquiring knowledge of the content presented.

Student Edition activities are intended to address a variety of learning styles. The **Ongoing Assessment Lab** at the end of each lesson provides skill practice with map interpretation, graphic organizers, writing assignments, and so on that can be completed individually, in small groups, or as a class. **Chapter Reviews** include **Active Options** activities that require students to demonstrate what they have learned through writing and using technology. The **Compare Across Regions** lesson can be found at the end of each unit, providing students with an opportunity to investigate a single topic across several regions. **Active Options** at the end of each unit offer three additional possibilities for expanding and applying student learning of content.

## COMPONENTS FOR THE TEACHER

The Teacher's Edition of the *World Cultures and Geography* program presents many possibilities for active learning and student engagement. **Best Practices for Active Teaching** offers a preview of the types of strategies used throughout the Teacher's Edition with a clear explanation of how to implement each one. For the highly experienced teacher, this may offer a review of practical procedures. Those new to the profession will probably want to return to these pages frequently to plan new experiences for students.

The **Strategies for Differentiation** at the start of each Teacher's Edition chapter offers ideas to engage striving readers, inclusion students, English language learners, gifted and talented students, and those in pre-Advanced Placement. You can decide how to apply each of these strategies to individual learners.

For daily planning, refer to each lesson's **Print Resources**, **TECHTREK**, **Introduce and Engage**, **Teach**, **Differentiate**, and **Active Options** sections. The Active Options section especially engages students with the **Interactive Map Tool** and (my personal favorite) **On Their Feet** activities. We know that middle school students are constantly moving and doing, and this feature provides you with ways to channel that bounding energy meaningfully.

Think carefully about how to select the options that are appropriate for your students. For me, Rule #1 in working with middle school students has always been to start simple and move toward the complex. It may not be a good idea, for example, to try to implement all of the available strategies and activities in one lesson. Start with those that make the most sense to you and gradually experiment with others. Inform students when you try a new strategy or activity and get their feedback on ways to improve it the next time. The activities and strategies found in this program are not meant to provide a recipe for success. Instead, they form a menu of options that support daily decision-making based on your own abilities and preferences and those of your students.

Up-to-date visuals in the Student Edition engage and inform students.

On Your Feet activity allows students to get up and move.

The screenshot shows a page from a student edition titled "1.3 The Island Arc of Japan". The page is divided into several sections:

- TECHTREK**: Includes a "Main Idea" section with a video link and a "Map Lab" section with a map of Japan.
- Introduce & Engage**: Contains an "Analyze Visuals" activity where students project photos of Tokyo and discuss their impressions.
- Teach**: Includes a "Guided Discussion" section with two main activities: "Analyze Cause and Effect" (discussing Japan's mountain range and trade) and "Interpret Maps" (projecting an earthquake map).
- Differentiate**: Features a "Striving Readers" activity using a jigsaw strategy and a "Gifted & Talented" activity where students illustrate a tsunami.
- Active Options**: Includes an "Interactive Map Tool" activity and an "On Your Feet" activity where students form concentric circles to discuss the physical geography of Japan.
- Background for the Teacher**: Provides information about Mount Fuji, Japan's highest mountain.
- Plan**: Lists objectives, print resources, and critical thinking skills for the section.
- Essential Question**: "How did geographic factors affect population distribution?"

Callouts from the surrounding text point to specific elements on the page:

- An arrow points from the "Up-to-date visuals" callout to a photograph of a coastal area in Japan.
- An arrow points from the "On Your Feet" callout to the "On Your Feet" activity section.
- An arrow points from the "Differentiated instruction" callout to the "Striving Readers" activity section.

Differentiated instruction provides strategies for individual learners.