THEMATIC UNIT PLANNING

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WHAT IS THEMATIC UNIT PLANNING

It is organizing teaching and learning around big questions or concepts to enable all students to participate in active learning.

"Thematic instruction is the organization of a curriculum around macro "themes." Thematic instruction integrates basic disciplines like reading, math, and science with the exploration of a broad subject, such as communities, rain forests, river basins, the use of energy, and so on."

www.funderstanding.com
HOW DOES ORGANIZING CURRICULUM AROUND THEMES AND BIG QUESTIONS SUPPORT ELLS?

• Students see the big picture so they can make sense of English language instruction.

Demonstrates the Interdisciplinary Nature of Learning. Content areas (math, science, social studies, literature) are interrelated. It compacts the curriculum.

• Vocabulary is repeated naturally as it appears in different content area studies.

• Big questions about universal human topics, can connect curriculum to students’ lives.

• English language learners are more fully engaged over a longer period of time and experience more success.

• Utilizes collaborative and cooperative learning.

• Increases effective use of computers and technology.

• All students can be involved, with lessons and activities that can be adjusted to different levels of English language proficiency.

• Expands the teacher’s assessment strategies.
It is important to select themes that are not only interesting to students, but are meaningful and substantive.

A theme such as "Challenges" enables students to learn about people who have struggled and won.

A theme on the environment helps students understand the importance of preserving and protecting the Earth.

Themes like these offer the opportunity to explore important ideas that challenge students to seek information beyond what they already know (Walmsley, 1994).
CHALLENGES ELLS FACE

• an abundance of idioms and figurative language in English texts
• density of unfamiliar vocabulary
• grammar usage especially the "exceptions to the rules"
• word order, sentence structure and syntax
• fear of participation and interaction with mainstream students
• directions are often multistep and difficult.

• Social Studies text contains complex sentences, passive voice, and extensive use of pronouns.
• lack of familiarity with historical terms, government processes, and vocabulary.
• concepts which do no exist in all cultures are difficult. This includes privacy, democratic processes, rights of citizens, free will.
• no concept of movement within the structure of a society.
• difficulty with understanding what is said by the teacher and being able to take notes.

Source: http://www.everythingesl.net/inservices/challenges_ells_content_area_l_65322.php
WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF THEMATIC UNITS FOR ELLS?

Thematic teaching allows the teacher to focus on individual needs, while offering an in-depth study of one concept area and the language and vocabulary that surrounds it.

**ESL teachers need to focus on the following:**

- building on students’ *prior knowledge*
- providing background information
- incorporating *oral and written language*
- building a *natural scaffold* for student learning
- engaging students in the learning at different levels of academic and linguistic development (*differentiation*)
- using *cooperative learning* situations
- developing *thinking skills* that students can use across the content area
- assuring Ells the opportunities to *master grade level standards while acquiring oral English proficiency.*
- pre-teaching potentially troublesome *words or concepts found in informational text.*
- teaching them *how to do research and how to organize* their ideas.
- teaching them *how to write down and express what they are learning*

The incorporation of age- and language-appropriate thematic literature into the early childhood curriculum can stimulate content-based academic learning for English language learners (ELLs). (Ghosn, 2002)
Thematic resources include potentially difficult concepts that need to be explained and modeled, benefiting native and non-native speakers alike.

*To differentiate instruction, teachers must know who their ELLs are and what they can do.*

http://widaatwcer.blogspot.com/2012/05/can-do-descriptors-in-grades-3-5.html
The teacher prepares “support in advance” activities, along with attention to idioms, multiple-meaning words, textual clues, re-alia, pictures, and various grouping configurations, to assist all students in participating with the class (Ernst & Richard, 1995).

“Support in advance” enables the students who struggle to fully participate in class discussions, writing, sharing, and reading, instead of being excluded. They are now class members who have a chance to succeed.
**Teachers** plan with high expectation for all
- **careful modeling**, demonstrations, and scaffolding
- reading materials available at **various levels of difficulty**
- **supplementing the text**
- **cuing** students to linguistic signals
- many opportunities for **rich cross-cultural sharing**.

**Students** have opportunities to demonstrate their competence in a variety of ways:
- by using the **four modalities** (listening, speaking, reading and writing).
- with **art or role-playing**
- by participating in group activities
- by sharing according to their linguistic ability
- by taking responsibility for their own learning
The first key instructional shifts associated with the Common Core State Standards in English language arts is the requirement that students read more nonfiction.

- balance fiction with informational texts
- informational texts are expected to be the shared responsibility of teachers across the grade
- creating new opportunities for cross-curricular projects
- specific literacy requirements for history/social studies, science, and technical subjects
- emphasis research and synthesizing skills

Rather than tackling these new objectives in subject-area silos, some teachers are choosing to integrating real-world themes and social issues into projects, reaching across hallways to do this work with colleagues.

To access teaching videos click on the link below:
http://www.colorincolorado.org/common-core/
Best practices to support these shifts:

• Establish a purpose and a disciplinary approach to texts
• Enhance Purpose with Authenticity
• Ask students to develop, create, or produce work to address a real problem for an audience that can benefit from such work.
• Students should understand why they are reading and what kind of information they should be paying attention to.
• Equip and enable students for performance to demonstrate understanding of key ideas

• **Theme.** Select an appropriate theme reflecting text topics (curriculum) student interests, experiences, issues, or problems.

• **Grade Level** Appropriateness

• **Focus.** Develop a one-sentence focus statement that summarizes the direction and intent of the unit.

• **Objectives.** Identify three or four specific objectives tied to the CCLS for students to master by the completion of the unit.

• **General Activities.** Develop performance-based activities to use throughout the unit that are broad-based, covering the range of curricular areas and reflecting elements of a literature-based program.

• **Discussion Questions.** Include a variety of open-ended questions that help students think about the topic in varied and divergent ways. Engage students in developing their own questions about the topic.

• **Materials and Resources.** It is advantageous to determine all the necessary materials and resources after the unit has been written.

• **Literature Selections.** Select books related to the topic of each thematic unit. Preview texts for linguistic demands. For literature selection you may wish to develop a pre-reading activity, followed by a variety of cross-curricular learning activities. Select books from a variety of genres.
PUTTING COMPONENTS PARTS IN PLACE

Assessment of student knowledge and abilities and frequent feedback

Multicultural resources

Trips and community resources to build background knowledge to connect to the real world
Some Opening activities that stimulate thinking and speculation are:

- **brainstorming ideas** they wish to explore or notions they find intriguing.
- **determining their own learning goals**, along with ideas for accomplishing them (Cooper, 1993).
- **forming learning teams around areas of interest**, partners are selected, and the theme's learning goals are shared.
- **involving families** at the beginning of the theme to bring materials, pictures, books, and expertise from home.
ON-GOING ACTIVITIES: IMPLEMENTING THE THEME

Once the theme is launched students begin to engage in:
- Independent, partner and group work
- Discussing
- Reading and writing
- Researching
- Creating and generating

While the teacher:
- Monitors the schedule
- Teaches and models lessons
- Facilitates group learning
- Assesses the learning
- Brings in community resources

http://www.nyhistory.org/education/educators/american-musicals-project/lessons-and-videos

Journals are kept; stories, articles, and poems are discussed; projects are created; and minds are challenged.
The science framework reflects the leading thinking on the nature of science and engineering education needed in the twenty-first century. In emphasizing major inquiry practices such as asking questions and analyzing and interpreting data, science learning calls for students to actively use and apply knowledge and should integrate conceptual understanding and language use with others. The NRC recommends using an integrated science literacy curriculum that combines collaborative, hands-on inquiry activities with reading text, writing notes and reports, and small group discussions.

Teachers will need to be prepared to know the language demands of specific tasks and to apply a range of language-support strategies to call attention to language in the course of using it. Teachers must develop a deep knowledge of the vocabulary and language functions for their content area and then structure multiple opportunities in the classroom for students to use language. Most importantly, language instruction as part of content-area learning should focus on discipline-specific concepts rather than overemphasizing syntax and grammatical form.

Students with limited English proficiency. The research literature indicates five areas where teachers can support both science and language learning for English language learners:

1. literacy strategies for all students,
2. language support strategies with ELLs,
3. discourse strategies with ELLs,
4. home language support,
5. home culture connections.

Science and Current Events

- Science learning thrives in vigorous communities that help students make connections with issues of importance to them. Through the scientific inquiry process students:
  - Learn vocabulary and language structures, and social interaction skills.
  - Develop conceptual understandings from text books, in addition to working, hands-on, with natural objects and events, and from communication with each other and their teacher. (role-play situations to propose solutions)
  - Express their understanding of concepts when teachers identify the language functions needed in science activities, such as, describing, agreeing, disagreeing, expressing opinions, or questioning.

- [http://upfront.scholastic.com/issues/09_02_13](http://upfront.scholastic.com/issues/09_02_13)
Preparing for Writing Across the Curriculum

Focus on academic language development by front-loading the vocabulary with the following supports:

– visuals, video clips and other realia
– graphic organizers, flow charts and thinking maps for categorizing and note-taking
– language frames to teach students how to sequence an answer, use text-based evidence, explain cause and effect relationships and compare and contrast
– explicit instruction on key words: temporal (when), comparative (both), enumerative (in addition, furthermore) and causative/conditional words
– structured cooperative discussion groups where students orally process information with peers
– immersion in the genre (editorial, speeches, poetry)
Differentiating for ELLs

• To provide ELLs with maximum access to core curricula, educators can differentiate:
  – the content of lessons,
  – the process by which the teacher presents the new information,
  – the products created by students, and
  – the learning environment.

• Curriculum standards dictate what must be taught; differentiated instruction can be the way in which to teach it (Tomlinson, 2001).
Differentiation Activities for ELLs

• Cubing
  – Science
• Tiered Activity
  – Social Studies
• RAFT
  – Math
Cubing

- Students use & share their thinking in relation to a topic, subject, or unit of study.
- Teachers (or students!) make a list of six directions.
- Each direction is relevant to the information gained from the text or other materials.
- Students (independently or in teams) roll a die.
- They follow the direction that corresponds with the number rolled.
Cubing Example

- Earth Science Objectives:
  - **Content Objectives:** Students will be able to distinguish between physical and chemical properties (and changes) of various substances.
  - **Language Objective:** Students will be able to describe physical and chemical properties by speaking and writing during “cube” activities.
Cubing Example

• HOTS Cube:
  - 1. **Illustrate** one of the physical changes you saw during our labs.
  - 2. **Define** “chemical change.”
  - 3. **Use** lab equipment to demonstrate a chemical change.
  - 4. **Create and plan** your own experiment that would allow us to see a physical or chemical change.
  - 5. **Compare** 3 substances based on their physical and chemical properties.
  - 6. **Argue** for or against the following statement. Use 3 facts to support your argument.
    • “Chemical changes do not affect the physical properties of substances.”

Free template from www.brainybetty.com
Implementing Cubing

• Assign a certain number of tasks to be completed.
• Consider multiple intelligences cubes:
  • Visual/Spatial: Draw it...
  • Logical/Mathematical: Solve it...
  • Kinesthetic: Demonstrate or role play it...
• Naturalist: Find examples of it in the real world
• Musical: Write a song or rap about it...
• Verbal/Linguistic: Tell a story with it as the main character...
  • Interpersonal/Intrapersonal: Tell a partner about it… or… write a personal journal entry about it.
• Construct a class set of cubes, color code them by readiness, interest, or learner profile.
Differentiation Strategies

http://www.slideshare.net/kristenlindahl/tesol-2010-differentiation-language-objectives
EVALUATE WORK AND PROGRESS

Student Self-Assessment Is Important

• How will students be **guided to self-assess**, self-monitor, and self-adjust individually and collectively as the work progresses?
• How will learners engage in a final self-evaluation to identify **key understandings**, **remaining questions**, **set future goals**, and **point toward new learning**?

*Include:*
• Rubrics and exemplars
• Checklists or criteria charts
• Journals
• Conference summaries
• Written reflections
Cross-curricular thematic instruction provides authentic, ongoing, multidimensional opportunities to assess students’ progress, participation, and achievement. The teacher assesses throughout the theme, both formally and informally.

- **Formal assessment** may include specific tests of reading, writing, and the use of language.

- **Informal assessment** opportunities occur throughout, yielding authentic information about student progress, such as:
  - anecdotal comments
  - brief conference summaries
  - observations of discussion groups
  - journals
  - reflections from mini lessons
  - learning team reports
  - Index card summaries from students
  - One-minute essay at lesson conclusion
  - Visual representations made by students
  - Hand signals
PERFORMANCE TASKS

Research:

– current classroom tasks are designed to be completed in a single thirty- to sixty minute period (Doyle 1983, Fisher and Hiebert, 1988).

– the “deepest” type of learning occurs when learners have the time to engage themselves in increasingly more sophisticated “layers” of investigation and explanation of content, with each layer bringing new insights and new learning (Jaques 1985).

– For the most effective learning to occur, students must be allowed to articulate a unique position and defend it (Vosniadou and Brewer 1987).
It may also be helpful for parents to contribute insights into their child’s learning (Manning, Manning, & Long, 1994). During parent-teacher conferencing, some of the following questions can be discussed:

- What has your child talked about at home in relation to this theme?
- What appears to be the aspect of this theme that is most exciting to your child?
- How much help does your child require to complete theme activities at home?
- How is your child benefiting from learning about this theme?
- What home or community resources, if any, has he or she used while studying this theme?
WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF THEMATIC UNITS FOR ELLS?

• [http://prezi.com/rlnhwfwovc8e/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy&rc=ex0share](http://prezi.com/rlnhwfwovc8e/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy&rc=ex0share)
Conclusion

The integration of language and content teaching does not happen without a great deal of effort.

• There must be systematic alignment of the language and the content objectives during curriculum development (Genesee, 1994)

• Both language and content teachers need training outside their areas of expertise: language teachers in content information and teaching strategies, content teachers in language learning strategies and second language acquisition theory.

• Teachers and administrators must be dedicated to try, revise and try again as they design engaging lessons to address the needs of ELLs.

• Teachers must expect to spend many hours in previewing materials and preparing materials themselves.

• Lesson and curriculum design works best when language and content teachers collaborate.
A teaching strategy to launch a thematic unit

Find a picture and use the book Fire in Yellowstone: a true adventure, by Robert Ekey

Consider this example.

- Prior to reading about the devastating fire in Yellowstone National Park in 1988, children in a fourth-grade class who would benefit from support in advance gather with the teacher, along with, perhaps, a couple of more prepared students who would like to join the group.

- For approximately ten minutes, this small group examines the photographs in the text, *The Great Yellowstone Fire* (Vogel & Goldner, 1990), and lists ways in which the forest and wild animals might be affected by a forest fire.

- While this activity is taking place, the rest of the class is engaged in journal writing related to the piece they will read.
Teaching Strategy continued...

- Following the brief support in advance activity, the small group and the teacher rejoin the rest of the class for a discussion of what the students know about forest fires.
- Because the small group has received a "jump start," they are ready to participate fully with the rest of the class and can add their newly learned information to the discussion.
- Also, since later mini-lessons and major strategy lessons are contextualized by the topic that all students have been reading about, it is easier for students who struggle to make connections about what they are learning.
- Skills and strategies are modeled and scaffolded by the teacher and other students, and all students are provided time for group work and a chance for leadership.
- Therefore, in thematic teaching, opportunities for success are plentiful for all learners.