

Cross-Curricular Thematic Instruction

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“Reading means new worlds to explore, a gift, a pleasure. It means learning, discovery, mystery, and adventure. It is not just words... it means having endless fun and enjoyment.”

*Derek G. , Grade 4
New Hampshire*

This excerpt, taken from Derek's journal, is titled, "What Reading Means to Me." It was shared by his teacher, who is beginning to use cross-curricular themes in her reading program. She wanted me to read it, as well as some other pieces of her students' writing, because she feels proud of what reading means to her students. Obviously, this piece represents a capable young reader who has learned to read for a variety of purposes and who connects reading and writing not only to learning, but to enjoyment and discovery. These links have been forged through Derek's experiences with oral language development, early reading and writing, and environmental and other print sources, and through thousands of social interactions, all of which have been interconnected within his home and school environments (Ruddell & Ruddell, 1994).

This paper describes cross-curricular thematic instruction that encourages the exploration of important topics, problems, and questions by engaging students in many varied reading and writing opportunities. It presents suggestions for teaching themes that build upon what students know, because such themes increase confidence, improve reading and writing, expand concepts and background, and foster positive attitudes about reading and writing.

Background

Teachers who use cross-curricular themes create active readers and writers by engaging students in authentic literacy tasks that emerge naturally from interesting and worthwhile topics and ideas. Authentic tasks are defined as "ones in which reading and writing serve a function for children..." and which "involve children in the immediate use of literacy for enjoyment and communication" (Hiebert, 1994, p. 391). They focus on student choice and ownership; extend beyond the classroom walls; involve a variety of reading and writing opportunities; promote discussion and collaboration; and build upon students' interests, abilities, background, and language development (Hiebert, 1994; Paris et al., 1992). Cross-curricular themes integrate the language arts (reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and thinking) across a variety of content areas, such as science, social studies, art, and so forth.

Research findings indicate that good readers connect and utilize ideas and information from a variety of previous life and literacy experiences (Anderson et al, 1985). Sustained reading of interesting texts improves reading comprehension and enhances enjoyment (Fielding & Pearson, 1994; Reutzel & Cooter, 1991). Over time, the effect is that comprehension improves as students read more (Hartman & Hartman, 1993). Therefore, to increase understanding, students should have experience reading a variety of texts, including narrative and expository literature, as well as "real world" materials such as brochures, magazine articles, maps, and informational signs. These varied experiences enable young readers to build a foundation that will prepare them for future "real life" reading and writing tasks. Because our lives require us to integrate what we have learned in an interdisciplinary manner, teaching children through merged disciplines better prepares them for applying new knowledge and understandings. Additionally, when students view their learning as having personal relevance, they put more effort into their schoolwork and achievement (Willis, 1995).

Advantages of Cross-Curricular Thematic Instruction

Students and teachers alike enjoy reading and learning about topics and ideas that are interesting and challenging. Along with enjoyment, cross-curricular thematic instruction offers a number of other advantages (Cooper, 1993; Fredericks, Meinbach, & Rothlein, 1993; Lapp & Flood, 1994; Walmsley, 1994; Willis, 1995). Thematic teaching enables students to:

- *Acquire, communicate, and investigate worthwhile knowledge in depth.* With thematic instruction, it is not necessary to divide the day into separate learning periods. Instead, the day may be spent exploring an interesting topic in a variety of ways over a longer period. Students come to view school subjects as connected and interrelated, rather than isolated and divided, because subject areas such as math, science, social studies, art, and music may be studied within the context of a given theme. This exploration may include reading and writing about the topic, role-playing, art projects, music, and research.
- *Integrate and enrich the language processes of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking.* Active exploration of a topic promotes discussion and the use of all the language arts. Through these experiences, students learn strategies and skills in meaningful situations.
- *Practice reading different kinds of materials for varied purposes.* Narrative and expository literature serves as the focus of thematic instruction, but there are also multiple opportunities for reading other types of text, including poetry, student-written pieces, and "real world" texts such as magazine articles that contain challenging facts.
- *Use prior knowledge of the world and past experiences with language and text to create relationships among various sources of information.* Students build upon their current knowledge base and connect what they know with what they are learning. As new ideas are gleaned from a variety of reading experiences, they become integrated with previously learned information.
- *Make choices, interact, collaborate, and cooperate.* Students explore topics individually, in small heterogeneous groups, and together as a whole class. Reading and writing tasks are authentic, interesting, relevant, and contextualized. Students make choices based on their interests, abilities, and needs.
- *Apply what they learn in meaningful and "real world" contexts.* As students explore topics in a variety of ways and through various sources, they learn to relate what they are learning to their own lives. Activities for home exploration help students bridge school learning and their lives at

home, with the intent of helping students develop problem-solving and decision-making skills.

- *Informally assess their understanding and application of what they are learning.* Students and teacher alike share the responsibility for periodic progress checks as well as ongoing evaluation. Students learn to set learning goals and monitor their progress in attaining them.
- *Participate and learn, regardless of ability, level of language development, or background.* One of the most important advantages of cross-curricular thematic instruction is that it is both flexible and adaptable. Because a variety of reading resources are utilized, all students have the opportunity to read materials that are of interest to them and at the appropriate difficulty level. Lessons are flexibly planned, based on students' needs and interests. For example, while some students may need extra practice with a strategy or skill, others may need additional time for writing or independent reading. This flexibility is central to thematic teaching.
- *Learn effectively in self-contained, multi-age, or departmental classrooms.* Again, the flexibility of cross-curricular thematic teaching makes it an effective tool in any organizational pattern. For students, it allows for a variety of approaches to instruction that meets their needs. For teachers, it promotes team planning and cooperation with colleagues.

Planning for Cross-Curricular Thematic Instruction

Select a Theme

When planning, 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). For example, students may understand the necessity of recycling aluminum cans and Styrofoam cups in their own communities, but they may not know anything about the destruction of the Amazon rain forests. Relating and connecting these two ecological concerns through appropriate reading and writing tasks enables students to move beyond their own lives into the larger world.

Choose a Key Concept to Guide Instruction

Once themes are determined, the goal is to select tasks that encourage students to investigate, speculate, and problem-solve, asking questions that enable them to explore other topics more fully. Key concepts for a theme should provide a clear focus for all instruction and learning. For instance, the key concept for a theme on the environment might be: "We should respect and preserve the natural world because our lives are linked to it." This key concept guides all activities and lessons, and the reading selections emerge naturally from it. It is expected, by the end of the theme, that all students will begin to internalize, build upon, and transfer this key concept to their own lives.

Identify Skills and Strategies to Be Taught

Within cross-curricular instruction, skills and strategies become the means for developing reading and writing abilities, rather than the end result of the thematic study. Specific skills, such as comparing and contrasting, can be taught through structured and carefully planned minilessons, or through more interactive lessons for those students requiring in-depth teaching.

For example, during the reading of *Like Jake and Me* (Jukes, 1987), fifth graders might complete a Venn diagram in which they compare themselves to members of their own families. This activity relates to the story in that the main character, Alex, ponders whether his soon-to-arrive twin siblings will be more like him or like his stepfather, Jake. Most important is that the skill is being taught and practiced within the context of the story and theme, not in isolation. Also, if it is necessary for students to have further practice comparing and contrasting, they may at a later point in the story complete another Venn diagram, this time analyzing similarities and differences between Alex and Jake.

Identify a Range of Appropriate Resources

To facilitate planning, it may be helpful to web a teaching plan for the thematic unit ([see sample planning web](#)). During webbing, cross-curricular connections are determined and a variety of reading materials and contextually embedded activities are identified. In addition to quality narrative and expository literature, "real world" texts and poetry are added in order to give students diverse reading experiences. Calling upon district or school specialists, as well as public library resources, for assistance with some content areas, such as art and music, can help to relieve the pressure on the teacher to become an "expert" on every thematic topic.

Reading materials may come from a variety of resources, including literature anthologies, trade books, and "real life" resources, such as magazines, brochures, and maps. Narrative and expository core literature anchor the theme, both for student reading and teacher read-aloud. Students may be involved in sharing other reading materials, such as thematically related books from their personal libraries, articles, family memoirs, computer software, newspapers, videos, or other relevant resources. In all, the reading materials for the theme are varied in terms of interest, genre, origin, and level of difficulty.

Developing a Schedule

Select a Time Frame

Planning a schedule and time line for instruction is also important. Some teachers prefer "theme immersion," in which the entire day, week, or month and all subjects of the curriculum revolve around the theme (Manning, Manning, & Long, 1994). Others choose to plan themes for several weeks around core subjects, such as language arts and social science (Fredericks et al., 1993). Still others choose to integrate primarily the language arts, and incorporate several subject areas, if appropriate, for a small portion of the day (Vogt, 1994).

Whatever the choice, it is important to keep in mind students' interests and attention spans, the availability of resources and reading materials, and curriculum guidelines. When teaching a theme for the first time, it helps to monitor student interest and involvement and to be ready to modify the time line, if necessary. If it appears that students are ready to change to a new theme before all planned activities are completed, it is better to move on and begin something new. Because thematic teaching is flexible and adaptable, changes can be made in the schedule with little or no disruption.

Consider the Teacher's Role

When planning the schedule, the teacher's role should also be considered. At times the role is to facilitate, at others to provide explicit instruction, and sometimes simply to serve as a resource. Activities may be directed by the teacher or, occasionally, by the students themselves. Whether an activity is more effective with whole-class, small-group, or individual instruction depends upon the

difficulty of the reading selection, the nature of the activity, and, of course, the abilities and interests of the students.

Give Thought to Grouping As mentioned, one of the advantages of thematic instruction is that it adapts to a variety of grouping configurations. Students may work together in heterogeneous cooperative learning groups, for example, having the opportunity to take leadership roles, develop understanding, and improve social skills (Slavin, 1990). At other times, however, students may read and study with partners or "learning buddies," or in triads. Grouping decisions may be made jointly by the teacher and students based upon which configuration might be the best for any particular activity.

Opportunities are also provided for students to work individually. Students are given time each day for self-selected reading and writing. In addition, whole-class instruction for some activities is efficient and appropriate. The type and difficulty of reading material, the nature and scope of the daily activities, the learning goals, and students' strengths and needs all affect scheduling.

Implementing the Theme

When introducing a new theme, the teacher generates excitement and enthusiasm while assessing, activating, and building background knowledge about the theme's key concept. Opening activities should stimulate thinking and speculation. Students participate in brainstorming ideas they wish to explore or notions they find intriguing. They also may determine their own learning goals, along with ideas for accomplishing them (Cooper, 1993). Learning teams are formed around areas of interest, partners are selected, and the theme's learning goals are shared. Students are encouraged to involve their families by bringing materials, pictures, books, and expertise from home. Connecting with the home at the beginning of the theme builds enthusiasm for what is to come.

Once the theme is launched, students begin to engage in reading and writing, in discussing and researching, in creating and generating. The teacher monitors the schedule, teaches lessons, facilitates, and assesses. Journals are kept; stories, articles, and poems are discussed; projects are created; and minds are challenged.

Helping ALL Students Succeed

"Support in Advance" for Struggling Students

In the past, students who struggled to learn were frequently excluded from participating in activities that led to exploration, discovery, and critical thinking. With thematic instruction, however, these students can be fully included. For example, prior to introducing a piece of literature or informational text, it is beneficial to provide additional support for students who lack background knowledge, or who have difficulty understanding selection vocabulary and concepts. Teachers or specialists may provide this background information and preteach potentially troublesome words or concepts. Other class members who possess a good deal of background information about the theme may join the group and share information. This "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.

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.

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 minilessons 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.

Support for Students Acquiring English

For students who are acquiring English as a second language, the suggestions described above are equally effective. Because thematic resources include a variety of ideas and perspectives, potentially difficult concepts may be explained and modeled. There are also many opportunities for rich cross-cultural sharing. Support in advance activities, along with attention to idioms, multiple-meaning words, textual clues, realia, pictures, and various grouping configurations, assist all students in participating with the class (Ernst & Richard, 1995). Teachers may also help students acquiring English by providing careful modeling, demonstrations, and scaffolding, and by having reading materials available at various levels of difficulty. Opportunities for students to demonstrate their competence in a variety of ways, such as with art or role-playing, are included. Most important, students acquiring English are encouraged to participate in group activities, are allowed to share whatever they can, and are motivated to take responsibility for their learning.

Celebrate ALL Students' Accomplishments

Toward the end of the theme a culminating activity draws together information that has been learned, as well as all the various materials students have read. Students' goals, projects, and learning are celebrated with parents, with other students in the school, and with each other. This final sharing enriches the learning experience for everyone and can result in a lifelong memory for the students involved.

Assessment

Self-Assessment Is Important

Throughout the theme, the teacher and students assess progress in a collaborative and supportive manner. Students' self-assessments may help determine progress in learning and may include checklists, journals, conference summaries, and written reflections. The important point is that the students themselves, regardless of age and ability, are involved in assessing what they have learned. These regular opportunities for self-reflection may be used as a final written summary to be included in a portfolio, along with other evidence of successful completion of the theme, or as part of the final project or activity.

Opportunities for Formal and Informal Assessment Abound

The teacher also 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. These may consist of anecdotal comments, brief conference summaries, observations of discussion groups, journals, reflections from minilessons, and learning team reports. Opportunities for evaluating participation in cooperative learning groups, following the development of social skills, and noting improvement in oral language may take place on a daily basis. Checklists may be helpful during student-teacher conferences and may assist teachers in later formulating letter grades for the theme, if necessary (see [sample evaluation sheet](#)).

Tap Parents for Insights

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?

In short, cross-curricular thematic instruction provides authentic, ongoing, multidimensional opportunities to assess students' progress, participation, and achievement. While it is important for students to enjoy thematic exploration, it is just as critical that teachers know what their students have learned.

A Final Thought

Cross-curricular thematic instruction allows students to contemplate problems and situations that reflect the world as they know it. For teachers and students alike, exploration and discovery become paramount; the teacher as the dispenser of knowledge is secondary. Learning is interrelated and information is connected. The common link is the literature and other texts through which students learn about the world and from which they branch out and investigate.

Derek, the fourth-grade reader mentioned at the beginning of this paper, concluded his journal entry with the following:

Reading means drifting away on clouds. It means memories for a lifetime.

His friend Kevin, a student in the same class who often had difficulty learning, wrote:

Reading to me means a way to relax and soothe ourselves after a hard day of school or work. Sometimes when you can't fall asleep, you can read a book. Then, if you get in trouble, you can read a book. When you get sick of TV, you can read a book.

Kevin P., Grade 4

New Hampshire

By making reading and writing relevant, interesting, accessible, and enjoyable through cross-curricular thematic teaching, we may help many more students share Derek's and Kevin's feelings about reading.

In so doing, they will be building a strong foundation for their future learning and living.

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