

Planning a Themed Literature Unit

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Adapted from "Themes of Human Experience: Linking Literature and Social Studies" by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Betsy Rupp Fulwiler, [Northwest Reading Journal](#),5 (1997)

Literature illuminates the human side of important issues and offers powerful opportunities to enhance literacy instruction. Many teachers consider themed literature units to be important components of a literacy program. However, some units developed by publishers or teachers still reflect only superficial integration of literature with substantive conceptual learning. Basing literature units on a foundation of a meaningful theme and its important concepts and generalizations is one way to promote more cohesive and meaningful learning.

This article will guide you through the process of developing a themed literature unit to enhance literacy instruction. We will examine the key elements of themes, outline the steps for creating a unit, and present two sample units.

What Do We Mean By "A Meaningful Theme"?

There are many definitions for "theme." As used in this article, a theme explores the human dimensions of any important topic. Rebecca Lukens defines theme as "a significant truth expressed in appropriate elements and memorable language. The significant truth is an element that is essential to turn a simple narrative into literature. This truth goes beyond the story and comments on human beings" (1989, p. 111). Effective, engaging themes are as numerous and varied as our human experiences. Some examples include "finding the courage to help others," "taking responsibility," "standing up for what you believe in," or "taking worthwhile risks." Each of these themes offers broad possibilities for developing students' conceptual understanding in concert with building reading and writing skills.

You can fit themes into your curricular topics in many ways. For example, a study of the Civil War could be deepened by examining literature that explores the rich human experiences that delve beneath the dates, battles, and events: Finding the Courage to Help Others, Survival, Injustice, or Discovering Inner Strength. Or you could begin with a theme -- Taking Responsibility -- and examine its implications through various angles in history, anthropology, or environmental studies.

An effective themed unit creates a web of intricately connected relationships and meanings that raise the teacher and students to higher levels of thinking, feeling, and understanding. Long after specific facts are gone, students will still carry the deepest meanings in their minds and hearts.

Generalizations: Foundation of a Theme

The web of connections within a themed unit are forged through generalizations, broad statements that relate to and provide a focus for a theme. Generalizations clarify the central concepts of the theme, forming "valid statements about relationships between or among concepts. The statements summarize information and are removed from specific situations" (McGuire, 1991, p. 44). For example, the following generalizations form the core of an intermediate-level literature unit, *Finding the Courage to Help Others* (Hayes-Lattin & Livingston 1994), developed to enhance the study of the Civil War:

- Sometimes courage is visible to others; sometimes it is known only to you.
- Helping others may mean putting yourself at risk; at times, it can even be dangerous.
- Deciding to help others can be very difficult; it means being willing to act rather than to remain silent.

Generalizations give you a foundation for instruction. The universe of possible connections to a theme can be overwhelming; stating four or five generalizations allows you to zero in on the central social studies concepts and ideas you want students to learn. Generalizations also provide a focus for assessment as you and your students see how well they understand what was important in the thematic unit.

Generalizations can come from several sources. You might select them as they arise naturally from the literature. Perhaps you will draw generalizations from the experiences you provide for students as they explore a topic. You might also guide students to come up with their own generalizations based on the books they read.

Steps in Developing the Unit

A themed literature unit can fit well into any structure for literature study. For example, the themed unit could become the focus for literature circles as students read, discuss, and respond to literature. The themed unit could precede or follow the factual study of the related social studies or science topic. Because the essence of the unit is the theme and its generalizations, there is no one way to organize the reading.

The following steps and guiding questions will assist you as you develop a themed unit:

1. **Select a theme.** The theme should be broad enough to offer varied opportunities for discovery. One way to begin is to think about your topic and ask yourself, "What is it about the Civil War that I want students to know and remember? What are the central human issues most important in this topic?" Answering the following questions will help you select

an effective theme:

Does the theme relate to life's important understandings (e.g., identity, change/growth, interdependence, courage, self-reliance)?

Is the theme valuable for your particular group of students, with deep intellectual and emotional benefits that will come from understanding the theme's generalizations?

Can you identify several significant generalizations around which to build your theme (e.g., "A person's identity is always changing.")? A theme that has the most potential for success is one for which you can easily think of important generalizations. If you have trouble coming up with generalizations, perhaps your theme needs to be refined.

Does it fit into your district's scope and sequence or curriculum frameworks for the language arts and social studies?

Does it integrate well, having substantive and natural connections to both the language arts and social studies? If the theme is also to be integrated with math and/or science, be sure this can be accomplished in ways that remain true to each area of study. It is better to concentrate on fewer, deeper integrative possibilities than to dilute the learning potential with too many.

2. *Brainstorm and refine the central generalizations.* The generalizations bring out the central concepts, issues, and understandings that are most significant in the theme. You might develop the list of generalizations, or you might guide students to come up with their own. The process of listing generalizations may overlap with the next, selecting books. You may find that you can easily choose books that deal with your generalizations, or you may need to mold your generalizations to fit the books you have.

3. *Select literature and other resources.* Choosing quality literature is as important as choosing the theme. The basic consideration should be: Are the books you have chosen worth reading to learn about the theme? If they are not, you may need to abandon the theme or change the nature of the unit. Consider the following questions:

Does the literature, whether fiction or informational books, relate significantly, rather than superficially, to the theme?

Do the authors have a solid understanding of the theme? For example, if they are writing about homelessness, does their writing reflect thorough research and knowledge?

Is the literature readily available?

Do you have books that work for all your reading levels? If not, do you have taped books that students can read at a listening center?

Can you find additional resources such as guest speakers, CD-ROMs, videos, hands-on material, reference materials, and museum exhibits?

4. Identify literacy targets (e.g., skills, strategies, dispositions, etc.) that you will teach with this unit. The themed unit provides an effective context for instruction in various literacy skills and strategies. As students deepen their understanding of the theme and generalizations, they also grow as readers and writers. Picture books about the theme provide a quick medium for enhancing thematic understanding while also working on such skills as finding evidence from text, predicting, and comparing/contrasting. Consider these questions as you plan for instruction in reading and writing:

Do the learning targets relate directly to the theme and generalizations?

Are you teaching the skills and strategies within the context of learning the generalizations?

5. Identify and develop assessment processes. Your assessment strategies will depend on your learning targets -- what you want students to know about the theme and its generalizations, as well as the specific literacy and communication skills you are working on in this unit. Your assessment focus will determine which learning activities you will want to use.

6. Organize learning activities for the unit. For each activity ask, "Is this meaningful and will it increase my students' understanding of the theme? Will it guide them to develop the learning targets and literacy skills they need? Does it meet my assessment goals?"

7. Develop response and/or research projects to extend students learning. You will need to plan effective ways for students to demonstrate what they have learned about the theme and generalizations. The specific nature of these response or research projects will depend on your theme, your goals for the unit, and your students needs. *The most important consideration for these projects is that they guide students to demonstrate what new understandings they have gained about the theme and its generalizations.* These questions should help you:

Have you suggested a variety of projects to accommodate individual styles? Do students have the opportunity to demonstrate their learning in their most effective way?

Have you required a written and/or oral component that relates the project to the generalizations learned in the unit? For assessment, the projects should reveal the degree to which the students have understood the theme as well as gained skills.

Have you provided opportunities for various modes of response through visual arts, drama, and/or movement?

We have included two sample themed literature units as illustrations of this process. Each was designed to enhance students study of a social studies topic: Standing Up for Your Beliefs supplemented the study of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, and Finding the Courage to Help Others accompanied a unit on the Civil War.

For each of the sample units presented, we have included the teachers rationale, unit generalizations, and a selected list of books. Each unit incorporates a range of books to accommodate students varying reading abilities. The teachers have included a number of choices to help you find appropriate books for the theme. In teaching the unit, you would probably use a smaller number of books than is provided on each list.

These units were developed for upper elementary students; with slight adjustments in book choice and the wording of the generalizations, each unit would work well at higher and lower grade levels.

Themed Literature Units

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Example Generalizations

*What does it mean to ... take action to care for others,
face hard times with courage,
find a place to belong?*

The example generalizations below are not grade specific, nor are they the only generalizations that might arise from the theme. These are given as samples of the kinds of statements you might use as the focus for your teaching in a themed literature unit. Therefore, they are intended as idea generators, not a prescriptive recipe.

Taking Action to Care for Others

- It is sometimes hard work to care for others, so you must be persistent, confident, patient and determined.
- No matter what your age, you can still take action if you believe in yourself.
- You may have to give something up even if you don't want to, and people might not agree with you.

Drawing on Inner Strength

- People draw on inner strength to help them persevere through tough times
- When we draw on our own inner strength we make a conscious decision to act out of courage rather than fear
- Fostering inner strength is a life-long process
- Sometimes it is difficult to find inner strength.

Facing Change with Courage

- Everyone has internal courage to help them face change.
- Others can help us gain courage to face change.
- Being courageous means overcoming change in spite of the odds.
- Different people have different reasons for needing to be courageous.

Finding a Place to Belong

- Challenges shape people, and make them stronger.
- Having a place to live isn't the same as having a loving home.
- Many problems occur as a result of not having a place to belong.
- Things we take for granted others may need.
- People need to be resourceful in order to survive when they face challenges.

Building New Friendships

- When we are in a new situation, we can make new friends.
- Friends enrich our lives and can help us in times of need.
- Friends share with one another to express their appreciation of the friendship.

What Carries Us Through Hardship?

- Hardships come in many forms and can happen to anybody.
- To get through hard times, we need to have faith in our own worth and our own power to act.
- To get through hard times, we need to be willing to try new things.
- One thing that can carry people through hardship is concern for someone or something outside of themselves.
- Sometimes family, community and the strength of cultural traditions can carry people through hardship.

COMPONENT PARTS OF A THEMATIC UNIT:

1. **Theme:** Select an appropriate theme reflecting curriculum topics (text), student interests, experiences, issues, and/or problems (See list of web sites at the end of this document-for ideas).
2. **Grade Level Appropriateness:** Review Appendix A and use the appropriate CCSS.
3. **Focus:** Develop a one-sentence focus statement that summarizes the direction and intent of the unit.
4. **Objectives:** Identify three or four specific lesson objectives you wish students to master by the completion of the unit. These should be tied to CCSS.
5. **Materials and Resources:** It is advantageous to determine all the necessary materials and resources after the unit has been written so that you are not limited to a few familiar items.
 - a. Printed Resources: newspapers, pamphlets, notices, travel guides, junk mail, journals, diaries, letters, maps, advertisements, brochures, flyers encyclopedias, dictionaries, magazines, booklets, and professional journals, etc.
 - b. Computer and CD-ROM Resources: Educational software, reference works, educational games, and simulations related to curriculum, and CD-ROM adaptations of literature, etc.
 - c. Internet Resources.
 - d. Audio/Visual Resources: videos, film, movie clips, slide programs, audio tapes, books and tapes, DVD's, and CD's, etc.
6. **Literature Resources (see Appendix B):**
 1. Fiction
 2. Non-fiction
 3. Poetry
7. **Activities:** Develop activities that are broad-based, covering the range of curricular areas and reflecting elements of the CCSS.
8. **Discuss Questions:** Include a variety of open-ended questions that help students think critically about the topic in varied and divergent ways.
9. **Literature Selections:** See "Materials and Resources" above and Appendix B. Select age appropriate text related to the topic of each thematic unit from a variety of genres. For text selections you may wish to review and develop strategies for the reading process, a variety of cross-curricular learning activities, and open-ended discussion questions.

10. **Culminating Activity:** The culminating activity engages students in a meaningful synthesis of their discoveries and leads to new ideas, understandings, and connections. Ideas include: a video, interviews, PowerPoint, newspaper article, debates, role- playing, etc.
11. **Evaluation:** Select a variety of appropriate formative assessments to evaluate student progress and growth. Document student participation through conferences, logs, and student journal writing, etc. Summative assessments should align to the CCSS.
12. **Related Works of Literature:** Select books that relate to the theme and make these available for independent reading and reading aloud.

Adapted from Legacies, Ch. 13, "Literature in the Classroom" by Liz Rothlein and Anita Meyer Meinbach,. HarperCollins College Publishers, 1996.

Web sites that provide ideas for thematic units:

1. <http://www.theteachersguide.com/Thematicunits.html>
2. <http://www.atozteacherstuff.com/Themes/index.shtml>
3. <http://www.theteacherscorner.net/thematicunits/>
4. <http://www.okaloosa.k12.fl.us/technology/training/tools/elem/k-2.htm>
5. http://www.alfy.com/teachers/teach/thematic_units/
6. http://www.education-world.com/a_lesson/
7. <http://www.ed.sc.edu/caw/toolboxthematicunits.html>
8. http://atozteacherstuff.com/Lesson_Plans/Thematic_Units/index.shtml
9. http://www.lessonplansearch.com/Thematic_Units/index.html
10. <http://www.schoolexpress.com/>

THEMATIC PLANNING SHEET

1. Theme:
2. Curricular Areas: Which curricular areas are being addressed? How can you link this to other content areas? (Look at the College and Career Readiness Standards)
3. Time Span:
4. Lesson Objectives:
5. Specific CCSS to be addressed:
6. Classroom Management: How will you meet individual needs and multiple learning styles? How will you meet the needs of diverse learners (e.g., grouping strategies, learning modalities, tiered texts, etc.)?
7. Materials:

___ Books, Folk Tales	___ Computer(s) (#___)
___ Songs, Chants, Poems	___ Digital Camera
___ Realia/Artifacts	___ Projector, ELMO
___ Supplies for games	___ Manipulatives
___ Nonfiction articles, essays, editorials	___ Art Supplies
___ Speeches, debates, radio broadcasts	
8. Formative and Summative Assessment:

THEMATIC LESSONS RUBRIC

As you design a thematic unit, take the time to assess its structure based on the following rubric. This will help you to produce quality instructional units designed to thoroughly integrate learning and meet the needs of your students.

THEMATIC UNIT RUBRIC

	Beginning 1	Developing 2	Accomplished 3	Exemplary 4	Score
Theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No theme evident Purpose is unclear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some attempt at a theme is evident but mostly unclear Various discipline connections are weak 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Theme is evident Most disciplines are included 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Theme is clear Purpose of unit is clear 	
Focus Question	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No focus question 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus question is too specific Focus question oriented to one discipline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus question is broad but not necessarily real-world oriented 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus question is broad, global Focus question encourages exploration Focus question applies to real-world issues 	
Instructional Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No goals or objectives listed Unit not age appropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Goals and objectives lack inter-discipline approach Activities are age appropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Goals and objectives based on standards Objectives written in measurable terms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Objectives integrate all disciplines Objectives encourage higher order thinking skills 	
Materials & Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Textbooks serve as sole resource 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A variety of print sources are made available to students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activities are project oriented Activity draw upon several disciplines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activities provide for multiple modalities Use of web resources is appropriate and effective 	
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activities are not clearly defined Students are required to simply restate facts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activities focus on knowledge level of Bloom's Taxonomy Students are not provided a choice in activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activities are project oriented Activities draw upon several disciplines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activities provide for multiple modalities Activities encourage creative expression and problem solving Activities can be student originated 	
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No evidence of evaluation for students or for the unit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment is conducted only at the culmination of the unit Assessment focuses on student performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment is a continuous process throughout the unit Assessment criteria developed with student input Assessment correlates with unit objectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students are encouraged to self-assess their participation and performance in the unit Peer assessment is used with group activities Team members share perceptions throughout the unit and modify as necessary 	

Information obtained from "Creating Cross-Curricular Thematic Units" by Patricia J. Terry