

# A Programmatic Approach to Teaming and Thematic Instruction

by

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## Rationale Supporting Thematic Instruction

Thematic instruction represents a developmentally response approach to organizing content in middle level classrooms. *This we Believe: Keys to educating young adolescents* (NMSA, 2010) identifies "...challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant" curriculum as a research-based characteristic of effective middle grades education. The very structure of thematic units enables teachers to readily challenge students thinking around themes of universal interest while presenting content in an integrated manner rather than as discretely separate subjects.

The Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills also recognizes the importance of integrated instructional approaches. It suggests that core subjects address important themes. This process promotes "...understanding of academic content at much higher levels by weaving 21<sup>st</sup> century interdisciplinary themes into core subjects" (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, n.d.).

Current brain research and cognitive theory support the importance of integrated instructional strategies. The brain seeks patterns to create meaning (Caine & Caine, 1991; Jensen, 2000). It naturally connects facts and ideas in an attempt to make sense of the world. This pattern detection strength of the brain requires immersion in a context rich with details, emotional tones, and imagery. The very structure of thematic instruction serves to ties ideas together around a larger whole (theme, concept, problem).

Recognizing the importance of integrated instruction in addressing young adolescents' learning needs and preparing them to develop higher order thinking skills necessary in today's world, the question remains, how do teacher education programs develop these competencies in future teachers? This article explores how one teacher education program responded to this challenge.

## The Challenge

The Middle Level Program at the University of North Carolina Wilmington strongly supports age appropriate practices. All of the program faculty members acknowledge the importance of preparing candidates to develop the competencies necessary to design and implement thematic units. Although they philosophically support this instructional approach, in practice not all students are given training in this area. As a

result, faculty decided to create a structure that assures that all candidates exit with the skills needed to design thematic units.

Initially, the content methods courses were identified as the most appropriate place in the program to develop these skills. Faculty discussed using the current structure of separate methods courses (mathematics, language arts, social studies, science) to deliver this instruction. In order to model teaming, they sought ways to co-teach thematic unit planning. As planning progressed, several limitations to this approach became apparent:

- Concerns over content coverage in methods courses if two-three class sessions were devoted to thematic unit development;
- Varied faculty expertise and experience with thematic unit development and teaching;
- Scheduling in a program where content methods courses are taught on different evenings;
- Inability to organize students on interdisciplinary teams; and
- No opportunity for students to share completed units with students in other methods courses.

Given these limitations, faculty began examining alternative ways to reach this program goal.

### Meeting the Challenge

After considerable discussion, frustration, and brainstorming, faculty found an answer to their prior concerns. The Middle Grades program area created a new one hour course, Thematic Unit Lab, as a vehicle for all students enrolled in the program to develop the competencies necessary to design a thematic unit in a team context. The course is a co-requisite for students enrolled in the content methods courses. All students beginning the program in fall 2010 are required to take this course the same semester as their methods courses.

The course proposal went through the curriculum approval process: Departmental review and approval; review and approval by the Watson School of Education's Curriculum Committee; and submission to the University for inclusion in the 2010-2011 catalogue. In order not to add an additional hour to the program requirements, the seminar accompanying the internship was reduced from three to two hours.

#### *Thematic Unit Lab: Structure*

The Thematic Unit Lab is designed to meet once a week throughout the semester. In order to model teaming, the methods faculty will collaboratively plan and teach the lab. Teacher education candidates will work in interdisciplinary teams to develop a unit with a faculty member assigned to monitor their progress and serve as a resource person.

Two methods faculty will evaluate each unit. During fall 2010, all middle grades methods faculty will evaluate each unit. This process will initially be used to establish

uniform interpretations of the rubric's evaluation criteria and inter-rater reliability. In the process of grading the units, faculty will discuss their interpretations and reach a shared interpretation of the criteria.

### *Thematic Unit Lab: Content*

The content methods faculty members share the teaching responsibilities for the lab. Based on areas of interest and expertise, each faculty member has responsibility for planning and teaching two class sessions. The sessions address a variety of topics: rationale and research supporting thematic instruction; effective teaming and common team planning; identifying themes, essential questions, and developing unit cohesion; integrating 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, technology and literature in units; formal and informal assessment; and creating culminating experiences. Approximately one third of the sessions are common team planning periods. During these sessions, teams meet to engage in the next step of thematic unit development. The assigned faculty mentors are available to answer questions and coach students in the process.

### *Collaborative Planning*

The middle grades methods faculty met a number of times during the 2009-2010 academic year to collaboratively plan for the Thematic Unit Lab. Meetings focused on several topics: content of thematic unit lab; designing a culminating experience for students in the lab; creating an assessment instrument; sharing the content of the initial class sessions on the assignment components and selecting a theme; and discussing articles supporting thematic units.

Since the content methods faculty members represent a wide range of expertise regarding thematic units, a professional development component became part of the planning process. Faculty members with extensive experience designing and implementing thematic units lead sessions on the assignment components and selecting a theme. In order to create a shared forum for learning, each faculty member led a discussion on an article supporting thematic instruction. The opportunity to learn together and engage in related discussions was most welcome!

### *Assignment Components and Rubric*

In order to guide students through the thematic unit planning process, it is divided into stages. The assignment components of each stage for undergraduate candidates follow (See Appendix A for the complete assignment description).

1. Create teams, select theme and young adolescent novel, identify unit's essential questions and write unit rationale.
2. Design lessons and create a unit development plan.
3. Design unit's culminating activity.

The thematic unit rubric rates teacher candidates' proficiency on several criteria: introduction and rationale supporting the unit; the team's plan for collaboratively

developing the unit; unit lessons; the unit's culminating learning experience; cohesion of the unit around the theme; and the presentation of the unit including voice and mechanics. The thematic unit is rated on a 3-point scale with ratings of "Meets Expectations" and "Exceeds Expectations" being proficient (See Appendix B).

### Pilot

The language arts and social studies methods faculty agreed to pilot the thematic unit assignment and rubric during the 2010 spring semester. This pilot served to provide unit models to share with future students and suggested minor clarifications to the rubric. In addition, students completed a self-assessment on the unit development process. Their responses gave faculty input on designing the thematic unit lab class sessions.

### Conclusion

The creation of a Thematic Unit Lab enables this middle grades program to assure that all of its teacher education candidates develop the competencies necessary to design thematic units and experience teaming in an authentic context. With this knowledge and experience, these future teachers can more effectively advocate for integrated approaches to teaching. Such approaches help students see connections between disciplines, their own prior knowledge, and real-world contexts. Discovering the inter-relatedness of life is truly the challenge and reward of learning!

### References

- Caine, R. N., & Caine, G. (1991). *Making connections: Teaching and the human brain*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
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- Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills. (n.d.) Core subjects and 21<sup>st</sup> century themes. Retrieved May 13, 2010 from [http://www.p21.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=57&Itemid=120](http://www.p21.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=57&Itemid=120)

## Appendix A

### Thematic Unit Assignment

#### *Introduction*

Interdisciplinary thematic units are a powerful tool for guiding young adolescents in “seeing” the connections between the disciplines they study. Aiding students in recognizing the patterns that weave facts, ideas, generalizations together across time and space helps them better understand themselves and the larger world. The universality of these patterns (themes) makes them relevant to young adolescents thus making it easier to link instruction to their lives. Thematic instruction immerses the learner thereby creating a multi-sensory, rich context for optimizing the brain’s natural inclination to seek patterns.

A thematic unit incorporates a macro or broad theme. Thematic units can be across grade level and/or interdisciplinary. Examples of themes include freedom, adaptation, change and continuity, diversity, human rights, communication, interdependence, service, and culture. A universal theme serves as a lens for understanding self and diverse groups of people in the world. Thematic units integrate two or more content areas and language arts skills/concepts such as authentic viewing, reading, writing, speaking, and media.

#### *Assignment Components*

Please note that sections in **bold blue font** indicate assignment requirements that only apply to MAT candidates. These assignment additions reflect the added rigor and research expected of graduate level candidates.

#### Stage I

**Conduct and share research on integrated thematic units (also known as interdisciplinary units) as a developmentally appropriate best practice at the middle level. Share your findings with undergraduate EMG candidates enrolled in methods classes. Incorporate the use of technology and a visual component in your presentation, i.e. PowerPoint, flyer, poster, video, etc. Your presentation should include a minimum of three citations (cited using APA Publication Manual, 6<sup>th</sup> edition) and clearly emphasize how integrated thematic instruction supports student learning and the development of 21st century skills.**

#### Stage II

1. Organize into teams of 3-4 colleagues, preferably with individuals representing a variety of content areas. Select a theme and grade level that the unit will address. Identify a young adolescent novel related to the theme (you can select either the novel or the theme first).
2. Write an introduction and rationale for the theme you plan to develop in the unit. Describe the rationale for your unit in 1-2 paragraphs. How is it relevant to young adolescents? How will it prepare young people to be more effective global citizens? Why is the content worthy of study? In addition, explain how the theme relates to the NC Standard Course of Study for the grade level you identified.

3. List your unit's essential/focus questions. These essential/focus questions guide students throughout the unit. They create a unit focus that is woven into each lesson. Limit your unit to 2-4 essential/focus questions. The unit's meaningfulness is increased if one question assists students in directly linking content to their lives.

### Stage III

1. Create your introductory lesson plan. This describes how you will introduce the novel and unit to your students. It should activate and/or build upon background knowledge to grab student's interest, relate the theme to students' lives, and predict or anticipate what is to come.
2. Assume that you will be teaching this unit for two weeks with 62 minute periods that meet daily (for a total of 10 class periods). Design lesson plans for nine days (includes introductory lesson). The final lesson will consist of a culminating activity that will be created in Stage III. Lessons should integrate the following components.
  - a. Differentiated Instruction – Lessons address learning styles, individual learning needs, cultural differences, and developmental levels.
  - b. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning – Lessons incorporate global awareness, technology integration, media literacy, critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration.
  - c. Content Integration – Lessons identify the goals/indicators from the NC Standard Course of Study that are addressed. Unit reflects at least two different core content areas (language arts, social studies, science, mathematics) and one encore subject (art, music, physical education, foreign language, etc.).
  - d. Supporting Resources – Unit includes at least two resources representing different medium, i.e. films, poems, virtual field trips, music, etc. Cite all sources using APA style.
  - e. Assessment – Each lesson incorporates informal and/or formal assessment strategies.
3. Team members designate roles, responsibilities and timeline for completion of unit development tasks. The team leader submits the unit development plan to a methods instructor.

### Stage IV

1. Design a culminating activity for the unit that requires students to synthesize and share their understandings. Include opportunities for students to apply their learning strengths in the activity. The culminating activity celebrates and applies students' knowledge gained from the unit. Create an assessment instrument appropriate to the activity.
2. **Describe a possible role for parents/guardians and those in the community to play in your unit. How will you involve them in the learning process? What mode of communication will you use? Develop a communication strategy. Discuss how you will involve parents/guardians, local business owners, neighboring colleges/universities, and/or community service organizations.**
3. **Reflect on the formal and/or informal assessments that your team incorporated throughout the unit. Does the unit use a variety of assessment formats? Are the assessment formats appropriate for young adolescents? Do the assessments reflect the stated learning objectives of the lessons? Do the assessments reflect student growth in regards to the unit's overarching goals? Are the assessments and evaluation processes well developed?**
4. Submit the completed unit using the Unit Builder feature in TaskStream. Upon submission of the unit, team members self-assess on the required unit components indicating how they addressed each component.

## Appendix B

### Integrated Thematic Unit Rubric

Criteria	Does Not Meet Expectations 1-5 pts.	Meets Expectations 6-8 pts.	Exceeds Expectations 9-10 pts.	Total
	Not Proficient	Proficient		
<b>Introduction and Rationale</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incomplete description of theme's relationship to NCSCOS, relevance, preparation for global citizenship</li> <li>Does not establish significance of theme and content</li> <li>Focus questions are vague or missing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acceptable descriptions of how theme relates to NCSCOS, relevance, preparation for global citizenship</li> <li>Some discussion of significance of theme and content</li> <li>Includes relevant focus questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Descriptions of how theme relates to NCSCOS, relevance, preparation for global citizenship are elaborated, clear, and include examples</li> <li>Clear discussion of significance</li> <li>Coherent and relevant focus questions that assist in pattern detection</li> </ul>	
<b>Development Plan</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not all members given tasks</li> <li>Very vague task descriptions</li> <li>Timeline for completion is vague or absent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some imbalance in planning tasks</li> <li>Somewhat clear description of tasks</li> <li>Timeline is basically realistic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Equally shared planning and leadership</li> <li>Clear description of tasks</li> <li>Timeline shows effective use of time</li> </ul>	
<b>Lessons</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Missing 1 or more lessons</li> <li>Introductory lesson fails to capture interest, activate prior knowledge, create relevance, introduce novel &amp; relate to unit</li> <li>Lessons do not identify NCSCOS goals/indicators &amp; integrate 2 core &amp; 1 encore subject</li> <li>Minimal evidence of integration of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills</li> <li>Most lessons do not differentiate instruction</li> <li>Most lessons do not include an assessment or includes unsuitable forms of assessment</li> <li>One or no resources representing different medium included in lessons</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3 lessons per team member using TaskStream template, some need elaboration</li> <li>Introductory lesson somewhat captures interest, activates prior knowledge, creates relevance, introduces novel &amp; relates to unit</li> <li>Most lessons identify NCSCOS goals/indicators &amp; integrate 2 core &amp; 1 encore subject</li> <li>Integrates 21<sup>st</sup> century skills</li> <li>Lessons somewhat differentiate instruction</li> <li>Most lessons include an assessment reflecting objectives</li> <li>Includes 2 resources, some errors in APA citations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3 well developed lessons per team member using TaskStream template</li> <li>Introductory lesson powerfully captures interest, activates prior knowledge, creates relevance, introduces novel &amp; relates to unit</li> <li>All lessons identify NCSCOS goals/indicators &amp; naturally integrate 2 core &amp; 1 encore subject</li> <li>Excellent integration of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills</li> <li>Lessons strongly differentiate instruction</li> <li>Includes variety of assessments reflecting objectives</li> <li>Includes 3 or more resources reflecting different medium, proper APA citations</li> </ul>	X 4 =
<b>Culminating Activity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Activity inadequately reflects the unit's theme and key ideas</li> <li>Celebration &amp; application are weak or absent</li> <li>Poorly designed assessment or it is missing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Activity reflects the unit's theme and key ideas</li> <li>Celebration &amp; application are somewhat present</li> <li>Assessment somewhat reflects activity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Activity synthesizes understandings related to theme and key ideas</li> <li>Celebration &amp; authentic application are strongly evident</li> <li>Developmentally responsive assessment system</li> </ul>	2 = X
<b>Unit Cohesion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lessons do not directly address at least 1 focus question</li> <li>Lessons are not linked to each other or are minimally linked</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most lessons address at least 1 focus question</li> <li>Most lessons are linked to each other</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All lessons address at least 1 focus question</li> <li>Lessons are clearly linked</li> </ul>	

<b>Presentation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overall voice is missing and/or dull</li> <li>• Lacks organization</li> <li>• Numerous errors are evident in one or more areas (assembly, mechanics, structure, clarity, consistency, analysis, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overall voice present but fluctuates in style &amp; strength</li> <li>• Adequate organization</li> <li>• Occasional errors one or more areas (assembly, mechanics, structure, clarity, consistency, analysis, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overall voice is powerful &amp; consistently captures attention</li> <li>• Superb organization</li> <li>• Virtually error free (assembly, mechanics, structure, clarity, consistency, analysis, etc.)</li> </ul>	
			<b>Total Points (100 possible)</b>	

**Comments:**