

## Using Modules to Teach Standards in a Face-to-Face Classroom

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### *Abstract*

*The National Middle School Association has identified standards that relate to effective research. I believe that modules (also called “learning packets” or “individualized instruction”) are one way to help teachers gain a deeper understanding of middle school concepts. Traditional courses often integrate modules as part of the course. I used modules as the basis for a face-to-face course. By integrating multiple text resources, interviews, explorations, and projects, I find that my students have a solid understanding of what middle level education involves. This article discusses module research, a process for developing modules, samples, and reflections modules had on a group of pre-service teachers.*

The National Middle School Association has identified standards that relate to effective research. I believe that modules (also called “learning packets” or “individualized instruction”) are one way to help teachers gain a deeper understanding of middle school concepts. By integrating multiple text resources, interviews, explorations, and projects, I am finding that my students have a solid understanding of what middle level education involves. This article discusses module research, a program for developing modules, and the impact modules had on a group of pre-service teachers.

### **Modules Are Not New**

In the 1970s, individualized instruction was at the forefront of educational pedagogy. In Illinois, the state outlined a format whereby professors and students came together to focus on common interests and they developed “modules” for teacher education programs (Governors State University, 1971). Modules were typically used in conjunction with traditional methods and involved pre-service teachers discussing information and participating in field work that mirrored

the objectives of the modules. Cianciolo (1971) described a children’s literature course that combined modules (consisting of objectives, activities, reference materials and evaluation experiences) with group discussions, demonstrations and small-group activities. The mean score for the course was 80% and students indicated they liked working with modules. In the 1970s, modules were designed to be used by large groups and small groups as well as for individualized instruction (Wright State University, 1975). In addition to the modules, the design included two days of full-time classroom experience, and three days at the university in which students were involved in discussions and demonstrations. The emphasis in the 70s was on performance criteria (1975). The focus was on individual accountability and often the modules presented individual concepts such as “with-it-ness” or “mastery learning.”

Borg (1974) studied the effectiveness of using modules to teach pre-service teachers the basic elements of classroom management. The modules included case studies, evaluation instruments and protocol films. (Films were used as an alternative for actual field work.) A total

of 93% of the students met the criterion level of 80% and students favored this approach to the traditional methods of teaching content. Traditional methods included lecture and defining concepts.

Learning packets (another term for modules) have been used to assist vocational education teachers and special education teachers. Dunn and Dunn (1978) introduced learning packets as a tool for teaching children. Information was broken into objectives, and material was presented in contract packets, programmed learning sequences and “manipulatives.” A student worked at their own pace and the teacher’s role was that of a facilitator. Other courses at the university level were using individualized approaches to teach reading content as well. The emphasis was on self-paced, content-specific objectives that used examples and often included self-tests as part of the modules (Glazer, S., 1978).

While modules in the 70s focused on individual topics, those developed in the 80s and 90s explored the use of new technology, including cassette tapes and filmstrips (Campbell, & Spector, 1975). Interactive software and on-line modules replaced the paper-based correspondence course materials. In 1982, Paul George and Gordon Lawrence published a textbook entitled *The Handbook for Middle School Teaching*, which consisted of modules. Teachers were given activities to show their understanding of the book’s content. The book gave teachers samples lessons and “next steps” at the end of each chapter. The textbook integrated information and a workbook approach to teaching middle school concepts.

### **Modules and the Constructivist Movement**

Constructivism took hold in the 1990s, leading to a new focus on cooperative learning. The effect of social interaction replaced the 1970s focus on individualization. The emergence of new

technologies (online chat rooms, discussion Web sites, and threaded discussions) since 2000 has allowed participants to interact with one another in traditional classroom settings as well as to share ideas across the globe. This emphasis has changed the way instructions are given and is changing the face of modules.

Teacher education has traditionally used modules as a supplement to face-to-face classrooms. Modules have been used to teach pre-service teachers management strategies, techniques and ways to work with parents. In many modules, case studies are used in the form of tapes or transcriptions (Harris, Jacobson & Hemmer, 2004). Harris, Jacobson and Hemmer (2004) used six modules to help students develop strategies for involving parents in the classroom. These modules allowed students to gain knowledge, develop skills and acquire attitudes that were conducive for working with parents.

Current research is focusing more on group collaboration skills through problem-based modules. Pearson (2006) used PBL (problem-based learning) in an MEd course at the University of Hong Kong. Students participated in face-to-face and online discussions. Pearson examined the responses of students at the end of the course to judge the effectiveness of the module approach. Results indicate that the modules were a useful tool for allowing students to interact online as well as face to face.

Not all of the research on using modules is positive. Ochoa, Gottschall and Stuart (2004) examined group participation and satisfaction with regard to a special education learning module. Results indicate that one or two participants make most of the decisions; and though all of the participants expressed satisfaction with the modules, observations suggest that not all participants contributed to the decision-making process.

On the whole, research has shown that modules are an effective teaching tool.

However, module programs require careful planning. By creating modules for the face-to-face classroom, I believe middle school students will be more prepared to embrace the online environment.

### **The Benefits of Modules as Part of a Traditional Classroom**

Research suggests that modules help students learn. It appears that the interactions of students in a classroom setting or in an online setting are critical. Lane, Dale and Horrell (August, 2006) examined the impact of online learning modules on students' content knowledge. They studied undergraduate students participating in statistics modules and found that models enhanced students' independent learning skills. In the study, modules were supplementary to the traditional classroom lectures and were optional for students to use.

Donnelly (June, 2006) described a case study that showed how a doctoral program in the Republic of Ireland included a problem-based learning approach based on a 10-week learning module. In her study, Donnelly described a "blended approach" as one that includes at least two approaches, including problems and electronic learning. The modules were used as a springboard to encourage students to participate in conversations and discussions.

Kock, Aiken and Sandas (May, 2006) examined the use of case-study-based learning modules. They looked at 76 undergraduate students. The findings indicate that using modules as part of a traditional course "significantly" increased the students' levels of understanding when compared with having students use the modules independently.

Lim, Lee and Richards (April, 2006) conducted a case study on the impact of a Computing Mathematics module in Singapore. They used a questionnaire and interviews. They found that using modules

for learning offers a number of advantages: the information is "chunked," different types of learners are considered, students are engaged in different levels of interactivity, and students are given autonomy.

Together these recent studies suggest that benefits can be gained by using modules in the face-to-face classroom or as a supplement to a regular classroom lecture. Though modules are different than they were 30 years ago, their goal is the same: to provide an alternative approach to teaching. By examining current module practices, educators can begin to develop their own modules for the university and the public school classrooms.

### **Creating Modules**

Research gives us suggestions for how to create effective modules. Ellery (2006) designed a research module on South Africa. She analyzed the effectiveness of these modules and found that they need purpose, sources, timings, methods, implementation, action and critical reflection in order to be successful.

Walters (2006) also looked at the components of good modules. He surveyed students who participated in a methods module that used "student-led group work as the primary focus" (p. 1). In his study, students worked in groups of three or four and concentrated on three components. Students were involved in real-life situations based on Kolb's (1984) cycle of experiential learning theory (concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation). They reflected collectively and individually. They discussed and researched methodologies and techniques available to them. They then identified a problem area, determined how to manage the project, and suggested specific activities.

Walters (2006) surveyed participants to determine what made a good project, a

good supervisor, and a good group. A total of 80% of the participants responded to the survey. As good project characteristics, they identified the need to practice skills, and the importance of having a setting that is easy to work in. A good group was identified as having members who have a range of skills, and who are reliable and available. Less of a focus was on the need for gender diversity. A good supervisor was identified as one who had “an understanding of students’ academic responsibilities” (p. 13) and who was available.

Another area of focus is on developing reflective teachers through the use of modules. In Singapore, Ng, Lan and Thye (2004) described a social constructivist approach in training teachers through professional development that focused on teacher reflection. They reported that the participants preferred a discussion/debate of critical issues to the more passive traditional approach to learning.

Modules have also been shown as a way to allow students to work collaboratively. Messmer (2005-2006) describes how ongoing collaboration in the setting of team work made students better researchers. Solem, Chalmers, Dibiase, Donert and Hardwick (2006) suggest that it is distance education and specifically the use of modules that could make it easier for teachers to collaborate with one another across the globe. Including research as a component of modules suggests that teachers need to be engaged in their learning community.

Forrester, Motteram and Bangxiang (May, 2006) studied e-learning modules between universities in the UK and China. Teachers used modules for professional development. Findings suggest that e-learning gave teachers opportunities they otherwise would not receive. The use of modules and the integration of technologies opened up opportunities for teachers to gain knowledge and communicate with one another. Online discussions were the focus of these

modules.

One area that has been inconclusive is the use of software packages as learning modules. Beckstrand, Barker, and Van Schaik (2001) presented a paper describing concerns connected with using education modules. Software packages were not consistent and instructors had difficulty implementing them. However, the use of software packages could possibly enhance modules.

As we begin to look at using strategies to supplement face-to-face teaching and as we look for more ways to create online learning as an interactive tool, modules offer an alternative that provides flexibility for instructors as well as for students. Modules give students autonomy and opportunities to work independently as well as in groups. Modules can be set up to engage students in discussion and reflective exercises. Because modules have specific components, participants can approach learning in diverse ways.

### **Developing Modules The Template**

1. Standards and Goals
2. KLTQ and AA Activity
3. Reading
4. Web Exploration
5. Interviews
6. Projects/Products
7. Assessment Rubric

While developing online modules, I created a template of activities and expectations that would allow candidates to engage with students, teachers and administrators. All modules begin with Standards. Middle School Standards have been developed to provide us with a common focus, are based on best-practice and research, and can be used to assess the strength of programs. I use an introduction to each module to highlight the importance of the concepts that are addressed. Each module expresses the standard in the form of a “big idea” or “essential question” that

guides the activities set forth in the module.

### Sample from the “Adolescent Module”

We as middle school teachers need to understand our students. We need to realize that their behaviors are often not a reflection of what we are asking them to do, but instead a reflection of where they are emotionally, socially, intellectually, physically, and morally. The more we get to know our students and help them develop their coping skills, the more likely it is that our classrooms will be productive, safe places.

This module will inspire you to use your own ideas and interests concerning how adolescents learn, and illustrate how well you can analyze students.

When creating the module, candidates examine multiple resources. With the use of online tools, national middle school resources, research ideas, and field experience opportunities, candidates read for each module. I use a textbook and recommended web resources for each module. By having common readings, the students are absorbing consistent and accurate information.

Once standards and resources were identified the next step was to design tasks. As a designer, I use a similar format for each module. I begin with an **advisor-advisee (AA)** activity, which allows us to get to know one another. In addition, throughout the semester, candidates discuss their own advisor-advisee activity with the class. Because students have to present an AA activity, this format gives them access to what an AA activity is prior to completing the module on AA and teaming.

### Sample from the Middle School Practices Module

1. Warm-up. Complete the “So-Long” found at the end of this module. When you complete this warm-up with your students you need to tell them that family members are already going and that there will be personal supplies (soap, shampoo, deodorant, toothpaste, etc.)

The second task I have students complete is a **KLTQ** (Know, Learned, will Try, and Questions). The KLTQ graphic organizer is an adaptation from the common KWL (Know, Want to Know, Learned) that is used in many schools. The KLTQ allows the participants to reflect more on specific strategies they may try based on their reading and gives us an opportunity to have a dialogue with one another. I find that most of my students have insightful questions that reflect their ability to think deeply about how to apply the content they are learning to their future classrooms. The use of the “T” (What I will Try) was very insightful and allows candidates to reflect on the writings in the context of their own future classrooms. Their questions allow me to give them individual feedback and are useful in guiding class discussion.

### Sample from the Literacy Module

As you enjoy this module, consider how you as a middle school teacher can promote literacy project in your classroom. Before you enjoy this module, take about 10 minutes to identify what you believe “What I Know” about teaching literacy in middle schools. Use the following table to complete as you work.

### Brainstorming Log:

- What I Know (answer this chart first)
- What I Learned (add your thoughts as you read)
- What I Will Try (at the end, fill this in)
- What I would like to know more about (as a reflective exercise, let me know your thoughts)

The third task I use in each of the modules is readings. For each module, candidates are instructed to read 50-100 pages on a given topic. The readings come from the textbook they have, online sources (specifically the Turning Points materials), and/or articles and other resources. I also use this section to share PowerPoint presentations and other content and application information with candidates. Candidates outline and summarize their readings. This portion of the module is most like the traditional classroom setting. Candidates are able to complete this section with ease. Their summaries begin very logical and as the class progresses they are able to include reflections of their field experience observations to what they are reading.

#### **Sample from the Literacy Module**

1. Read and reflect on "Teaching Literacy in the Turning Points School" at <http://www.turningpts.org/guides.htm>. Outline what you find and write a one-page summary of your findings. You may put your reflections in an outline or bulleted format.

Web sites are a fourth task. Part of each module includes analyzing and finding Web sites that relate to each of the modules. Students prepare annotated bibliographies of Web sites to give to each other. This allows them to search for materials and become familiar with sites that they can use later. I find that students find informative websites. Some have not used annotated processes and this exercise teaches how to locate and describe websites.

#### **Sample from the Schools to Watch Module**

3. Now, go to <http://www.mgforum.org/ImprovingSchools/STWSTWbackground.htm> to read about the background and selection process of the National Schools To Watch. From this information, keep a log of what you find interesting. Your task is to:

- a. Read through the background and the selection criteria. Reflect on this section (one paragraph)
- b. Next, go to the Virtual Tour. Choose one of the Schools to Watch. Read through their profile and comment on how they use each of the selection criteria in their school.
- c. In the section marked tools, download the Schools to Watch chart. This chart provides a template for schools to use in evaluating their own program. Using the template, choose one or two of each of the criteria and analyze your school: the Strong Academics, Respect for Student Needs and Interests, and Equal Access to a High-Quality Education. If you are at a "Schools to Watch" school, identify two or three from each category that you find particularly strong and share what you do.

A fifth task involves research in the form of interviews or observations. For each module a specific interview guide is given, and candidates must complete the interview and then summarize their findings. In the face-to-face classroom, I include guest speakers. The interview format allows us to have specific questions and sets the tone for developing interviewing skills. I find that guest speakers reinforce their reading and

research. We use the interviews to compare and contrast ideas. Candidates are able to analyze interviews and report common themes across topics.

### **Sample from the Middle School Practices Module Interview Guide**

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Date of the Interview \_\_\_\_\_  
Person you are interviewing and their e-mail address \_\_\_\_\_  
Position at your school \_\_\_\_\_  
Number of years in education \_\_\_\_\_

1. Ask the participant if it is okay to share their responses with other classmates. Tell them their names or school will never be identified. Ask them if we will be able to use their responses to conduct research?
2. What do you see as the most challenging characteristic of adolescents? How do you suggest teachers work to help adolescents based on these challenges?
3. What three management techniques do you believe are the most important in working with adolescents?
4. What suggestions do you have for teachers who may be working with children who have behavioral problems?
5. If you were to work with teams of teachers, what advice would you give them to help them work together with the children and with the children's families?
6. What are some strategies you use for communicating with parents?

The sixth task for each module consists of a product to display the students' understanding of the module content. There are usually "choices" for students to consider creating. Some modules allow students to develop their products in groups or pairs. I find that the products students create allow them to personalize their learning and demonstrate their

understanding through synthesis and evaluation of material. Candidates also report that they enjoyed using their creative abilities to create products for the modules.

### **Sample from the Adolescent Module**

1. Based on something you love to do, create a model that illustrates adolescence from the social, emotional, physical and intellectual perspective. The model should include some form of multimedia (digital images, 3-dimensional objects, multiple mediums). In addition, an explanation of the project should provide information about the characteristics and how they relate to the project. (You will find an example of this on the website.) Based on the project, identify recommendations you have for students to help them in their transition to adolescence.

Modules counted for 60% of my students' grades. For each module, I include a scoring form and grade students individually on each aspect of the module (See Appendix). When the module is due I provide each student with a summary of his or her performance on each module. For the first module, I allow students to correct and/or revise the various components of the module. This gives them a chance to clarify their understanding of my expectations. Candidates enjoy receiving the individual feedback on their KLTQs, and find the modules very clear.

### **Implementing Modules**

Once a format is decided upon, modules become opportunities for professors to be very organized. In our face-to-face class, we work on the modules on Fridays during our class time in the computer room. I become the facilitator of learning. My students like the format of the

“modules” and say the autonomy allows them to work at their own pace. Because some of the activities are individual and other tasks are completed by groups, students are introduced to aspects of “teaming” and the advantages and disadvantages of being part of a smaller or larger team. In addition, students become familiar with the online format of instruction.

Very often after I have gone over all the requirements for a traditional course, students are overwhelmed by what they must accomplish. Because we began with a module and worked through it together, my students did not feel the anxiety that has been expressed in other classes. In addition, my students rated my teaching as being “very organized” – a response I attribute to the nature of teaching with modules. In a survey at the end of the course, candidates’ shared that they felt the module format was very challenging. None of them had taken courses that used this format. They indicated that they found the opportunities to work together and to work individually allowed them to gain a thorough understanding of the topics given. They thoroughly enjoyed the guest speakers and the field experience opportunity and felt like they worked very hard. They liked the organization of the module format in the face-to-face classroom.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the reflections and performances of my students, I will change or add several elements to the modules. First, I will add more explicit directions for the candidates so that when they conduct their field experience, they will focus specifically on the different standards while they are observing. In retrospect, I did not ask students to observe specific elements of the standards, which may have left them at a loss when it comes to what they saw.

Second, I was surprised to find that four to six modules was sufficient for a semester course. I noticed that on the last module (classroom management), candidates were not processing the information as well. I will spread the classroom management module across the course. I believe that adding a chapter about classroom management to each module will make the content blend theory with practice better.

Third, I conducted the first module with a group of teachers at an institution in the east. We met via the teleconference twice and reflected on issues about working with parents. Our candidates shared their ideas and the information they each gathered. The experience was very powerful for our candidates. We ended up sharing this collaborative project at two conferences together. My hope is to collaborate more so that our candidates can interact with other candidates and develop a professional learning community.

I have found that working with modules has made me more reflective as a professor. I am more careful to show the connections between the different standards, and I believe that my students are gaining a deeper understanding of the material based on the format of the modules.

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## Appendix

### **Darlene \_ Module 3 Assessment Submit the following for This Module; Submit your Warm-Up and Brainstorming Log (10 points):**

*Good reflections.*

*I enjoyed reading your warm-up and your log. I believe that very often our faith provides us with an acceptance of other people's differences and challenges us to live what we believe. Knowing more about adolescent development can, in some ways, give us strength ( One interesting aspect of brain growth is that some research suggests that the brain is on a plateau and thus students need what is referred to as a "spiral curriculum" meaning that concepts recur in grades 6-8... that bringing in new information is difficult for them to process. Another thought is that 75% of the students are at a "concrete level" as opposed to "abstract". This kind of reflects some of their moral development responses. It also reflects why they need to actually engage in learning experiences as opposed to lectures. On a different note, research suggests that students at the middle school age become very interested in lots of different things and love to explore social issues as well as scientific inquiry. Finding out what they are interested in and monitoring those interests throughout adolescence is beneficial to teaching. By knowing what they are interested in,*

*we as teachers can begin to cater lessons to their interests.*

\_\_\_ Outline and summarize the characteristics of middle level students based on your readings. Choose two characteristics from each of the areas (social, intellectual, emotional, physical, and moral) that you think are the most important. (20 points)

*You did a great job using multiple resources and summarizing your thoughts.*

\_\_ Analyze the characters of an adolescent literature book. Discuss why students would relate to the book you chose based on adolescent characteristics. List five detailed activities you could do with students using one of the books. (20 points)

*I liked your activities but felt like you didn't really address adolescent characteristics of Stanley and Zero as well as you could have.*

\_\_ Submit the results of your interview and your response to it. (Your response should be between ½ and 1 page.) (10 points)

*This was a great interview and you did a wonderful job giving your thoughts as well.*

\_\_ Include an annotated listing of websites for working with adolescents that relate to social, emotional development of adolescents (10 points)

*Good job finding and giving a description of the websites.*

\_\_ Submitted a product, project or adolescent literature analysis that illustrates something you are passionate about. (You may use multimedia to share your project. A digital image with the explanation is appropriate. If you choose to write a book or a book of poems or other multi-page products, consider using Page Maker or other document set-up.) (30 points)

*The explanation of the project is clear and connected to middle school concepts. The project is*

*presented well, grammar, communication and organization of thoughts is evident. I am always amazed at what my students bring to the table with regard to this project. I have made quilts for years and loved your ability to connect quilting with adolescent lives. I would like to post this one on my website as a sample!*

Total \_\_\_\_\_ Grade\_\_\_\_\_

I am asking you all to add your “ah-has” to WebCT.

I would also appreciate any feedback to make the modules more clear.