# Planning Thematic Literature Units

Christopher Johnson

In the March 1994 issue of English Journal, the editors marked the 100th anniversary of the report of the NEA's Committee of Ten, which established the curriculum of English in this country. To commemorate this anniversary, several authors presented their perspectives on the present and future of the English curriculum.

Don Zancanella described efforts to move toward an interdisciplinary curriculum, to infuse multicultural literature, and to incorporate mass media (23-29).

Robert Yagelski argued that "Literature . . . should be removed from the center of the secondary curriculum and become part of the study of language that should be at the center of the curriculum" (35).

Robert Probst emphasized that personal responses, connections, associations, and meanings are central to helping students develop a lifelong love of literature and reading. He stated that reforms in teaching literature should aim at "the over-arching goal that experiences with literature will yield pleasure--aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, and social--for students" (42).

Finally, Arthur Applebee suggested that quality conversations about literature are more likely to occur in thematic literature units, which encourage connections and multiple perspectives toward ideas. Yet, Applebee also observed, "As a profession . . . we have given surprisingly little attention to how to construct effective thematic units, or to what kinds of relatedness will in fact foster rich conversations" (49).

As Applebee suggests, well-constructed thematic units address the priorities and concerns expressed by the other authors in that issue of English Journal. Units built around themes place literature into a context of ideas and issues that help students see the connections between literature and their own lives. In addition, thematic units integrate the language arts, create opportunities for authentic multicultural infusion, and expand naturally to include the arts and mass media. Finally, thematic literature units can grow naturally into thematic interdisciplinary units that extend to social studies, fine arts, science, and mathematics.

One of the most educationally valid reasons for thematic literature units is that they move ideas to the center of the English curriculum. If introduced properly, ideas galvanize student interest because they are empowering. They are the vehicles by which people connect the random observations and experiences of

their everyday lives to form a coherent picture. Adolescents very much need to form these coherent pictures in order to begin seeing how they perceive their place in the world.

But as Applebee has pointed out, thematic units accomplish these purposes only if ideas, activities, and connections in a unit are substantive rather than superficial. In addition, units should not be so loaded with material that insufficient time is left for exploration of and reflection upon each text.

To help teachers create effective thematic units, this essay will present ten suggestions based on current research, classroom observation, and the writer's own experience as a teacher and curriculum developer. These suggestions are intended as a starting point in a dialogue that will lead to the creation of thematic units that interest students, help them relate literature to their world, give them opportunities for authentic communication, challenge their thinking, and, as Probst wrote, "yield pleasure--aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, and social" (42).

1. Base the themes on issues and concerns that matter to adolescents.

2. Specify the learning outcomes of the unit.

3. Make the theme concrete and real for students.

4. Use guiding questions to give the unit purpose for students.

5. Develop the theme with widely diverse literature: a variety of genres, authors, cultural backgrounds, and historical periods.

6. Make media part of the unit.

7. Invite and encourage students' personal responses to the literature and other texts.

8. Focus on the meaning of the literature and explore literary technique as it contributes to that meaning.

9. Make connections to other disciplines.

10. Use culminating projects to give students the opportunity to communicate in authentic ways about the theme.

**Base the themes on issues and concerns that matter to adolescents.**

In his book From Rhetoric to Reality: A Middle School Curriculum, James Beane presents a superb overview of developmentally appropriate themes for adolescents (61). While Beane presents these themes in the context of interdisciplinary instruction in middle schools, they are also a remarkable synthesis of universal themes and ideas that have been the stuff of literature since the earliest stirrings of the literary imagination. In addition, these themes have the potential to be highly relevant to students today. Consequently, they are a useful starting point for planning thematic literature units (see table on following page).

Beane identifies both a personal aspect and a social aspect for each theme. In doing so, he addresses two major tasks of adolescence: to develop a personal identity and to develop awareness of the issues and problems of the world outside the self. He emphasizes in particular that schools should challenge students to examine "the array of larger social issues that face our society and world today and those which are likely to do so in the future" (57).

**Specify the learning outcomes of the unit**

Without this step, the unit may be nothing more than a potpourri of interesting and fun activities whose educational purposes aren't clear. Teachers may want to consider learning outcomes built around the following communication and thinking domains,



| Early Adolescent Concerns | Curriculum Themes | Social Concerns |
|---|---|---|
| Understanding personal changes | Transitions | Living in a changing world |
| Developing a personal identity | Identities | Cultural diversity |
| Finding a place in the group | Interdependence | Global interdependence |
| Personal fitness | Wellness | Environmental protection |
| Social status (e.g. , among peers) | Social Structures | Class systems (by age, economics, etc.) |
| Dealing with adults | Independence | Human rights |
| Peer conflict and gangs | Conflict Resolution | Global conflict |
| Commercial pressures | Commercialism | Effects of media |
| Questioning authority | Justice | Laws and social customs |
| Personal friendships | Caring | Social welfare |
| Living in the school | Institutions | Social institutions |

for a unit based on the theme of conflict (table on page 26). Notice that several of these domains go beyond the traditional focus of language arts classrooms. Domains such as self-directed learning, collaborative working, community participation, and high-quality production will help students connect literature to their lives outside school.

**Make the theme concrete and real for students**

Themes like wellness, justice, and caring need flesh and blood--the feel of everyday human experience. A good way to make a theme concrete is to launch a unit with an activity in which students articulate their prior knowledge about the theme. For instance, a way to introduce a unit on conflict would be with a variety of role-playing situations:

- Two friends argue because one has cheated on a test.
- Two students argue because one accidentally bumps into the other in the hallway and knocks books out of his or her hands.
- Two siblings constantly argue over using the television or stereo.

Teachers should encourage a debriefing discussion of each role-play. Through discussion, students explore further their own experiences and prior knowledge about the theme.

**Use guiding questions to give the unit purpose for students**

Heidi Hayes Jacobs writes, "A

| General Outcomes | Sample Outcomes for Unit on Conflict |
|---|---|
| Effective communication skills in: | |
| Reading | Comprehending nonfiction articles about conflict<br>Making inferences about how the theme of conflict is treated in stories, novels,or plays |
| Writing | Writing an article that analyzes causes and effects of conflict |
| Speaking | Contributing to small-group discussions of conflicts in literature<br>Mediating and resolving conflicts in role-plays that simulate real-life situations |
| Viewing and listening | Understanding and analyzing conflict situations in television newscasts |
| Independent, motivated, and self-directed learning | Completing an independent writing assignment to explain a plan to resolve a conflict<br>Completing an oral project that presents conflict-resolution strategies |
| Effective collaboration in groups | Working in groups to develop a public service campaign related to conflict |
| Effective thinking skills: | |
| Synthesizing ideas about a theme | Finding similarities and differences in how conflict is treated in different literature selections |
| Developing original ideas about a theme | Developing original ideas about kinds of conflict, causes of conflict, and responses to conflict |
| Solving problems related to a theme | Identifying a conflict and developing strategies for resolving that conflict |
| Citizenship and community participation in relation to a theme | Developing strategies for resolving conflicts in the local community, the nation, and the world |
| Development of high-quality products related to a theme | Developing written compositions, oral presentations, and visual presentations that deal with conflict |



structure for the unit of study will occur as a scope and sequence of guiding questions is developed" (59). Guiding questions unify the unit, giving the students a sense of purpose for reading each selection.

For student ownership and involvement , the best practice is to have students generate the guiding questions. However, teachers may want to have a few questions in mind in case the students need help. Here are some possible guiding questions for a unit on conflict.

- What is conflict?
- What are the kinds of conflict in our personal lives?
- What kinds of conflict do we see going on in the world around us?
- What are some ways to resolve conflicts?

As the class goes through the unit, teachers can assess the students' understanding of the theme by continually coming back to these guiding questions. To facilitate this process, teachers might have students create a poster with the questions. The poster can serve as a touchstone to which the students return as they read each literature selection in the unit.

**Develop the theme with widely diverse literature**

Students will be exposed to multiple perspectives, and they will start to see that there is no one true perspective toward the theme and no one right answer to the guiding questions. Moreover, they will begin the empowering process of developing their own perspectives and their own answers to the guiding questions.

The unit should have the more traditional literary texts. But there should also be a healthy dose of nonfiction, and the other arts and the media. I would recommend beginning the literary exploration of the theme with one or more nonfiction articles. A good article will concretize the theme, making it accessible to most students in the class. Time and Newsweek often have well-written overview articles. (Be sure to request permission from the publisher to reproduce such articles for classroom use.) The local newspaper may also have articles of use.

Not only will nonfiction help students connect the theme to the real world, but it will also bring into focus many of the key issues surrounding the theme.

In the conflict unit, for instance, articles and essays might explore family conflict, school conflict, sibling rivalries, and labor conflict. The students could bring in and share their own articles about conflict. In addition, the teachers should keep relating the articles to the guiding questions, recording responses as the class progresses through the unit.

Once one or more pieces of nonfiction have introduced various aspects of the theme, the students can move on to short stories, poems, novels, and plays. These works should be chosen for their variety as well as their quality and appeal to students. Literature from different cultural groups is particularly important in introducing perspectives that students may not have from their own personal experience. For the same reason, gender-balance in both authorship and major characters is critical. Finally, including both classic and contemporary literature will help students see the evolution through history of attitudes toward the theme.

**Make media part of the unit**

Media present different kinds of texts through which the students explore the theme. In addition, media

often have subtexts that will help students sharpen their analytical skills.

For example, one possible mass-media text to use in a unit on conflict might be a local television newscast. Newscasts are filled with stories involving conflict: crime, arson, abuse, war, and so forth. By asking questions like the following, teachers can have students analyze how conflict is treated in a nightly newscast.

- What kinds of conflicts are covered on the nightly newscast?
- Do news stories about conflicts contain racial stereotyping?
- Do news stories about conflicts contain gender stereotyping?
- What image of society do these stories about conflict create or reinforce?
- If you were the producer of the nightly newscast, what conflicts would you focus on? Why?
- What strategies, if any, for resolving conflicts are shown in news stories?

Film, radio, and popular music all present rich opportunities for exploration. Because students are analyzing these media in the context of a theme, they have a conceptual framework to begin understanding how mass media influence and manipulate their attitudes, preferences, and behavior.

**Invite and encourage students' personal responses to the literature and other texts**

A thematic literature unit can stimulate students' responses to literature for a number of reasons. First, because students are exposed to multiple perspectives toward the theme, they begin to see that no one point of view is correct. They also come to see the validity of their own responses and perspectives. In addition, a thematic literature unit creates an intellectual context that helps students to develop further their own ideas and opinions about the theme.

For example, as students read different selections in the conflict unit, they are developing ideas about the social and personal causes of conflict. In addition, they have observed a variety of literary characters struggle with and come to terms with conflict. As students become more familiar with concepts and vocabulary related to conflict, they will become increasingly able to articulate their own responses and ideas.

**Focus on the meaning of the literature and explore literary technique as it contributes to that meaning**

In transaction theory, the reader is a collaborator, an active participant in the creation of the meaning of a work of literature. As Robert Probst explains, "Meaning resides neither in the text, nor in the reader. In fact, it resides nowhere. Rather, it happens, it occurs, it is created an recreated in the act of reading and the subsequent acts of talking and writing about the experience" (40). A thematic unit helps the student become a more active co-creator of meaning by providing a conceptual framework. The challenge is how to help students use this conceptual framework to think about and discuss each selection in ways that are involving, provocative, and personally relevant. Here are some suggestions for achieving this goal.

*Use the guiding questions.* The guiding questions can serve as a framework for exploring--and creating--the meaning of each selection. For example, the guiding questions on conflict can be modified to be appropriate for an individual selection.



| Guiding Question | Question Applied to a Specific Selection |
|---|---|
| What is conflict? | What do you see as the central conflict in the selection? |
| What are the kinds of conflict in our personal lives? | What kinds of conflict do the characters face in the selection? |
| What kinds of conflict do we see going on in the world? | What kinds of conflict do you see in the world in which the characters live? |
| What are some ways to resolve conflicts? | What strategies do the characters use to resolve conflicts in the story? Do they succeed or fail? Why and how? |

*Relate the selection to other selections in the unit.* Students should see the selection as another voice in a continuing conversation about the theme. The teacher should use questions and activities to help students relate the selection to other selections. For example,

- How was the conflict situation similar to or different from those in other selections?
- How do the conflict resolution strategies in this selection compare with those that characters use in other selections in the unit?
- What advice do you think Character X in this selection would give to Character Y in another selection?

*Use mini-projects.* Often a mini-project that grows out of a selection can stimulate students to look more closely at that selection. For example, a mini-project for a story in the conflict unit might be to have students work in small groups to role-play a situation in which a mediator helps characters in the story to resolve their conflicts.

*Set up a discussion or debate around one central issue in the selection.* Instead of asking many questions about a selection, teachers can often stimulate better discussions by giving students one rich, controversial question or issue to think about. For instance, in the story "Antaeus," by Borden Deal, T.J., a boy who has grown up in the country and moved to the city, convinces a group of boys in his neighborhood to create a garden on an apartment roof. The owner of the building discovers what the boys are doing and forces them to remove the dirt from the roof. A good stimulus for debate on this story would be the following.

> Resolved: The owner of the building should/ should not have forced the boys to remove the garden from the roof.

*Teach literary form and technique as a means to an end--the expression of ideas and feelings.* When students become engaged in the ideas expressed in literature, they start to see more sense in the analysis of literary technique and form. For instance, examining plot structure, setting, and methods of characterization in "Antaeus" makes more sense once students have explored meanings in the story, because students can more readily see how these elements add

resonance to the theme of conflict.

**Make connections to other disciplines**

Another way to make literature as relevant as possible is to help students see that literature explores human concerns and issues that are also the subjects of inquiry in other disciplines, including history, science, fine arts, and mathematics. For instance, in the conflict unit, teachers might use readings on the following topics from various disciplines.

- World history--diplomacy and international conflict; labor conflict; the clash of cultures in colonialism; religious conflict; economic conflict
- Science--conflict in the animal world; competition for scarce resources; conflict in the process of evolution
- Fine arts--portrayals of conflict in paintings (Guernica, the paintings of Jackson Pollack)
- Mathematics--resolving conflicts in labor negotiations; resolving property conflict through land surveys

In a high school with a commitment to interdisciplinary curriculum, the possibilities to expand a thematic literature unit into a thematic interdisciplinary unit become more potent. A good starting point is to adapt the guiding questions for literature into guiding questions for each discipline. For example, the guiding questions on conflict might be adapted to history as follows.

- What are the causes of conflict among nations?
- What are the different kinds of conflict?
- How have nations attempted to resolve conflicts throughout history?
- What are ways in which nations currently try to resolve conflicts?
- What works and does not work when nations use these conflict-resolution strategies?

Similarly, the guiding questions can be adapted to other disciplines: biology, chemistry, physics, art, and even mathematics. Moreover, if teachers encourage students to generate some or all of the questions, then the students are more likely to take them seriously as starting points for inquiry.

The guiding questions can then serve as advance organizers for integrated instruction. The questions for each discipline will suggest content for the unit. At the same time, the questions suggest concerns that cut across the disciplines. In the example of the conflict unit, these issues are *causes* of conflict, *types* of conflict, *resolutions* of conflict, and *evaluation* of conflict-resolution strategies. These common issues become the unifying principles around which true integration occurs.

**Use culminating projects to give students the opportunity to communicate in authentic ways about the theme**

Finally, whether the thematic unit is interdisciplinary or remains focused on literature, teachers can use culminating projects to give students authentic opportunities to synthesize their thinking and express their own ideas about the theme. In authentic projects, students meet true needs in the school, the local community, the nation, or the world. Furthermore, students complete and present their projects to authentic audiences. By doing such projects, students will synthesize the understandings they have gained about the theme and will apply those understandings in creating something new that has practical application in the real world.



For instance, several writing projects suggest themselves for the unit on conflict.

- Students put themselves in the place of a mediator and write a plan explaining how to resolve a particular conflict.
- Students take a conflict issue in the newspaper and write an article that gives background on the issue and alternatives for resolving the conflict.
- Students think of a conflict they are having in their own lives and write a letter to the person with whom they are having the conflict. In the letter, they suggest ways to resolve it.

Another type of culminating activity is a community service project, in which the students create and deliver a service that meets a community need related to the theme. The unit on conflict could have several possible community service projects.

- Students work in groups to develop a public service campaign to suggest alternative ways of resolving conflicts. They might create posters, write songs, or create television ads against violence. To make the project truly relevant, students can focus on conflict issues in their own community or school.
- Students can create a presentation that will help students in elementary school resolve conflicts. This presentation might involve role-play situations, posters that list conflict-resolution strategies, brochures, and resources in the community for resolving conflicts.
- For the global community, students might develop and present a strategy for resolving a particular conflict, such as one over trade, natural resources, or national borders. The students can research the conflict, develop resolution strategies, and present those strategies in creative ways.

Such projects are for real purposes and real audiences. In addition, they are interdisciplinary. To do them, students must go beyond language arts into history, sociology, psychology, communications, and even statistics.

Moreover, teachers can use such projects as assessment instruments. The projects ask students to synthesize information and ideas in order to create new products or services. Teachers can develop rubrics for evaluating the projects. In this way, the projects become important measures of the extent to which students have understood the content of the unit, developed the skills taught in the unit, and synthesized their understandings by creating something new.

By the end of a thematic unit organized around the ten principles, students will have explored an idea that is at the center of the human experience. But the hope is that they will have done something more--that they will have immersed themselves in that idea and will have made it their own. And if we as educators can help students connect that idea to their own lives--if, for example, students are able at the end of a conflict unit to settle arguments or avoid fights or understand something of the dynamics of international conflict--then the unit will have been a success. For the students will have read, thought about, and become involved with literature for a larger and more authentic purpose--to enlarge and enrich their understandings of themselves and their world.

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# To Air is Human

**A Collection of Humorous or Thought-Provoking Examples of Misspellings or Unexpected Language Use from Student and Faculty Writing**

In response to their instructions for using their new vocabulary words in a sentence, Jim Holden's students provided these submissions:

**Spliced**: Man and woman were spliced together in Holy Matrimony.

**Bias**: The king was sitting on his bias and all his subjects were kneeling.

**Pestilence**: A pestilence is when someone is always bothering another.

**Prohibition**: He was on prohibition for defacing public property.

**Mystical**: The unicorn was a mystical beast.

**Adagio**: Frank is very adagio when he tries to get away from his dad.

**Belittle**: To make the dress fit you have to belittle it through the seams.

**Prevalent**: Parents are so prevalent that we take them for granted.

❧ *Submitted by Jim Holden, St. Olaf College, who collected these daffy malaprops during his 29 years of teaching high school English.*