

CLASSROOMS ALIVE!

Using Integrated Thematic Teaching

Are you tired of the same old routine year after year? Are your students bored with workbooks, ditto sheets, and rote learning? We found ourselves facing that dilemma—even contemplating careers outside of education. Then we stumbled onto Integrated Thematic Teaching (ITT).

For us, it all began one summer at a Bill Martin Jr. Whole Language workshop. We came home each day excited about summer school and eager to learn more. Martin's whole philosophy is that the students are the curriculum. If they enjoy what they are studying, learning occurs.

So we took the plunge. Our classrooms and students became alive and vibrant. Teaching and learning became meaningful.

Our experience with ITT has been implemented with grades 1 through 6, but this approach should work well with the upper-grade levels, and multigrade classrooms as well.

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Choosing Themes

As noted above, in this program the students are the curriculum. They are motivated to learn about what interests and surrounds them. When choosing your themes, key in on your students, keeping in mind topics about which they have expressed curiosity. At the beginning of the year, it's helpful to choose broad overall themes to provide direction (e.g., transportation, environments, inventions, and continents). Then break the topics into manageable units. But don't get so tied to a theme that you can't

diverge from it. If your students get excited about a related topic, include it as a study unit and let them explore it. Oftentimes themes revolve around the seasons, special events, or holidays. Take advantage of an election year, the 200th birthday of the White House, the Winter Olympics, or a local snowstorm.

Most teachers using ITT switch themes monthly or quarterly, but we've found that a weekly change works best for us. We break larger topics (e.g., oceans, the solar system, the rain forest,

and insects) into smaller weekly units: planets, moons, the sun, stars, and rockets for the solar system; water, the intertidal zone, ocean geography, whales, fishes, and boats for oceans. Students tend to lose interest in a subject if you stay with it too long.

How to Get Started

Developing this type of program can seem overwhelming. It does take time. Here are some suggestions to help you get started:

- Network with one or two other teachers.
- Get parents and church members involved; draw on their resources and expertise in various subjects.
- Buy ready-made thematic units, available in teacher bookstores.
- Visit classrooms that are using Integrated Thematic Teaching.
- Enroll in in-service workshops that feature thematic teaching.
- Read articles in current teacher magazines and professional journals.

Start out slowly. Integrate only two or three subjects as you begin, then gradually include your whole curriculum. From our experience, there should not be a rigid structured “right” or “wrong” how-to list. A lot will depend on your teaching style and what fits best for you and your students. We are constantly revamping and re-evaluating. We’ve experienced some flops, but on the whole, we have had the excitement of seeing students internally motivated, enthusiastic about learning, and discovering that education is integral to their lives.

Beginning a New Theme

This is the time for *immersion!* Fill your classroom with books, periodicals, poetry, posters, simulations, and examples of the real object. Most classrooms will need several different levels of information, from picture books, which everyone enjoys

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With Integrated Thematic Teaching, learning takes place as a whole—not in fragmented pieces.

looking at, to books that are really brain busters. Studying about rivers? Have the students collect and bring water samples from nearby rivers. Studying about salmon? Bring male and female salmon to class with their eggs. Invite guest speakers from the community and church, including parents and grandparents. Show videos, films, and slides. Get out of your classroom and see things firsthand. Studying simple machines? Go to a machine shop and let your students see how the basic machines work together to make the larger machinery operate. Teachers often assume that students know certain basics. We have found that,

more often than not, when children are touching, seeing, hearing, and smelling an object, they are experiencing these things for the first time. The “aha” phenomenon occurs frequently in ITT.

Integration of Curriculum

Teaching thematically makes it difficult to separate areas of the curriculum because so many of the student projects involve skills in more than one discipline. During a recent snow unit, the students made snowmen, after which they daily measured the heights and circumferences of the snowballs, and charted the rate of melting. Later they compiled this information into a

graph. Students also wrote stories and poems about snow, composed songs, and drew pictures. These activities integrated science, math, reading, language, writing, music, physical education (PE), and art. The ideas listed below are organized by curriculum areas to show how to include all the disciplines. However, there is a lot of overlap within each area.

Worship and Bible

We start each day with a worship that ties into the theme. We’ve been amazed at how naturally and easily this can occur. Units on friendship, peacemakers, the Christmas story, sheep, snow, bread, and kings and queens fit naturally. But what about popcorn, hats, bubbles, and bicycles? When we studied hot air balloons, our pastor created a mini-hot air balloon using a dry cleaning bag. He compared it to how the Holy Spirit comes into our lives and lifts us heavenward. For the unit on popcorn, we compared popped and unpopped kernels of popcorn, comparing this to the way Jesus comes into our lives and changes us. But, like popcorn, we are still unique and retain our individuality. Even though

no two of us are alike, we are still changed and loved by God.

We're using our Bibles more than ever, and our students are excited about the spiritual lessons. For Bible classes, we follow the conference-prepared curriculum, integrating the thematic lessons whenever possible.

Language

At the beginning of each week, we seek to immerse the students in the subject matter. Pictures, posters, teacher read-alouds, and films help us accomplish this goal. From there, the students' projects blossom into skits, experiments, stories, and poems.

A literature-based reading program fits well with ITT. In such a program, students read duplicate copies of books. Vocabulary, sequencing, cause and effect, and decoding skills are still taught, along with higher-level thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. As much as possible, we have the students respond to the material read. Journaling can be an important part of this process. Time is also provided each day for silent reading, and the students often read theme-related books during this class period.

Vocabulary lists are created and used across the curriculum each week. Some weeks these are student-generated; other weeks they are teacher-generated. These words can be used to teach anything from science concepts to alphabetizing, dictionary skills, parts of speech, syllabication, graphing, and mapping. Spelling words can also be generated from these vocabulary words.

The vocabulary lists then serve as excellent resources for writing assignments. We usually do not begin writing activities until the students have

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built up a core of information about the theme. We then write lots of classroom and student books. Alphabet books lend themselves well as classroom books. Each student chooses a letter or two and writes those pages. During our unit on feet, the pri-

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mary-grade students wrote an imaginative classroom book about a walk that we had taken. Here are a few examples:

- "B"—We Bounced happily along and saw Bozo the Busy clown Bopping to the Beat of a Bongo drum;

- "C"—We Came to a Cuddly, Cute Cat who was Cleverly Catching Curious Catfish;

- "G"—Going along we saw the Great Gray Goat eating Green Grass behind the Gigantic Gate; and

- "Z"—Our friend Zapper Zebra was supposed to meet us at a certain Zion, but he couldn't. Zebulun was after him.

This "Z" entry was proudly written by a student who in the past had struggled with traditional writing assignments.

Writing activities can be more than narrative creations. Writing has become an important part of the themes we study. For example, while we were studying the Columbia River, we introduced the names of the parts of a story, i.e., characters, setting, plot, climax, and theme. We had been discussing and reading about the early settlers coming to the area overlooking the Columbia River. We talked about the time, the place, and the general conditions. The students had to create a story setting that presented this basic information. Over the course of a week, we continued to develop characters, plots, and a climax to the stories around this particular theme.

We encourage students to share their work during the writing process and at the completion of their projects. They love this opportunity. As a result, they gain confidence in their ability to write,

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and as they listen to the ideas used in their classmates' writing, this sparks new ideas in their minds.

Students love to act—and skits are a marvelous way to immerse them in the material! They can act, use puppets, or make use of reader's theatre scripts. Encourage student-written productions. At the beginning of the year, it can be helpful to start by acting out a picture book with an easy-to-follow pattern. For our unit on trains, we used *Hey! Get Off Our Train* by John Burningham, and for the unit on quilts, one of our favorite books to act out was Patricia Polacco's *The Keeping Quilt*.

As we move through each theme, the students can choose a variety of topics for reports. Besides the wealth of materials found in libraries, they locate information on CD-ROMs. Once their research is completed, they can write a report using their word-processing skills or develop it into a hypercard multi-media presentation.

Art

Art is a natural for thematic instruction. Oftentimes we start out with art projects relating to the theme, and then use these projects for our writing, plays, or poems. This really sets the tone for the themes. Studying fish? Make fish prints. Read Leo Lionni's book *Swimmy* and then have each student make a torn paper fish from red construction paper. Deserts? Do

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colored sand sculptures. Native Americans? Read "Annie and the Old One" in the Life Series reader Level 10 and have each student create a weaving project. Or make totem poles. Kites? Make kites. Owls? Make puppets. Feet? Make footprints. You can also create murals. Two of our favorite murals were made after reading books. We made a winter forest with animals after reading the book *The Big Snow* by Berta Hader. After reading *Mr. Gumpy's Outing* by John Burningham, the students divided into groups, and using butcher paper, drew the various characters and created the setting. Encourage students to use a variety of media such as watercolors, tempera paints, and torn paper. It would be easy to spend the whole week on these kinds of projects.

Music

Singing can also help integrate thematic instruction. Our students have become so accustomed to this method that they frequently bring suggestions for

songs—both spiritual and secular. You'd be amazed how these songs help reinforce the concepts they're studying. You will even have aspiring song-writers who compose their own words for familiar tunes. We have printed songbooks so that all the students can become familiar with the words. As they're singing, they're reading!

Math

Including math in the thematic process presents a bigger challenge, although, with the recent changes being set forth by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, this is becoming easier. With the current focus on problem-solving, more and more material is adaptable to thematic teaching. Using a name theme, we incorporated the following problems into the math period:

- Very young children can count the letters in different names, comparing to determine "more or less" and then recording this information on a graph.

- For primary-level students, assign a number value to letters of the alphabet and have them calculate the value of their first and last names and then the difference between them. Once this is done, they can compare their name value with that of a partner and calculate the difference or find the sums of their name values.

- For older children, assign a higher value to the numbers so that regrouping of numbers occurs as they add and subtract.

- Another activity to use is count-ups, using the number of letters in each name.

Jim 3

Elizabeth 9

Jim Jim 6

Elizabeth Elizabeth 18

Jim Jim Jim 9

Elizabeth Elizabeth Elizabeth 27

- Each student can create a fraction by giving the portion of consonants in his or her name (e.g., Jennifer, vowel part of name, $3/8$; consonant part, $5/8$).

- Help students discover the symmetry in letters, both vertical and horizontal.

- Students can also create problems to solve.

- Math journals provide a good opportunity to integrate reading, writing, and math.

Real experiences also provide valuable opportunities for math instruction. For example, a visit to an apple orchard gener-

ates process problems using hourly wage, number of workers, bushels of apples, and kinds of apples picked in a particular week.

During the unit on apples, we learned that an apple is 85 percent water. We chose apples and weighed them daily, graphing the results. After a number of days, only 15 percent was left. At the culmination of the apple unit, the students used measuring, reading, weighing, and cooperation skills to mix and bake 200 apple muffins. They gave the muffins to the senior citizens of our constituent churches.

Physical Education

Weaving PE into the theme helps to involve all the senses in learning. It is easy to integrate the various themes into activities with a ball, a jump rope, a bean-bag, a parachute, movement, and running. Students often bring to school a new game they've created. So we practice a skill and then incorporate their game. Many times during PE, we use and reinforce the week's vocabulary words.

Science

For many units, science concepts are a natural part of the topic. When we were studying about popcorn, we talked about water and heat. First we observed that, when heated, water became steam. In previous studies of solids, liquids, and gases, we had learned about the movement of molecules and discovered that the molecules in steam must be farther apart than molecules in liquid. If there is a little bit of moisture inside each kernel of popcorn, what happens when it is heated? It expands, causing the corn to explode, or "pop." We measured the weight of the corn before and after it was popped, determining that the evaporation of moisture during the explosion was the reason why the popped kernels weighed less than the unpopped ones.

Probability and percentage also can be taught using popcorn. For example, students can estimate how much of the popcorn will pop. Then they can calculate what percentage actually failed to pop. In this and many other ways, science and math work closely together.

Social Studies

Maps are an everyday experience in our classes. Most subjects talk about places. Many of the themes studied fit into the

social studies curriculum—geography, social responsibility, communities, and history.

When studying Mount Everest, we used world maps to locate mountain ranges around the world, as well as the highest peaks within mountain ranges. During a unit on immigration, the children researched their family history and created time lines. Our study about the Berlin Wall initiated curiosity and lively discussions about Communism. During the 1992 election campaign, students wrote and gave speeches, made banners, and held rallies. They cast their votes for national candidates, state measures, and issues relating to their own school.

A whole new world has been provided for our students through the Internet. They have established correspondence with children from other parts of North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia.

Exciting Extras

You'll be surprised at the many different tangents taken by some of your lesson plans. As we started the unit on apples, we gave each child an apple to use in generating a vocabulary list. After using whole apples for a while, we cut them into quarters so the students could experience the different tastes and textures. We talked about cutting the apples into two pieces for halves, then cutting each half in two more pieces for fourths. We were ready to stop at that because we did not want a math lesson at this time. But a second grader raised her hand and volunteered a way to cut the apple further to make eighths. From there another student took it to 1/16 and then 1/32. Several of the students worked from there to develop the concept even further.

Our local conference education department has been incredibly supportive. They have supplied us with curriculum materials, kept us informed of local in-services, helped us to network with other teachers, and given us release time to observe other schools using thematic instruction. They have seen how effective and powerful ITT can be in the classroom and they want to see it used to its full potential.

With Integrated Thematic Teaching, everything fits together. Learning takes place as a whole—not in fragmented pieces—creating a big picture that makes

sense to students. As you study the different themes, it's astounding how all the little pieces from various units combine to create a larger picture that helps the students make sense of the world they live in. And because this relates to their everyday world, they are motivated to learn. ✍

RESOURCES

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