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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the thematic unit as a series of activities including reading, discussions, drama sessions, art workshops, games, writing, and movies, all revolving around a single topic. Students are free to seek and select their own books or stories within the topic and to read at their own pace. The thematic unit also includes a heightened oral interaction which comes from working with the shared topic. A World War II unit used by a heterogeneously grouped seventh and eighth grade class with reading ability ranging from about third grade to adult level is described in depth. It was concluded that the unit was successful in a number of ways. The children learned how to gather information from many kinds of books. They used drama sessions to explore feelings and read for detail. They read stories critically, comparing and questioning story line, character development, and the reliability of the information they had read. Moreover, the children were enthusiastic throughout the unit. A bibliography of books related to the World War II theme is given. (TS)

On Beyond Veatch

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On Beyond Veatch

Years ago, "integration" was the magic word for educators interested in developing a cohesive, meaningful elementary and secondary curriculum. Later "correlation" was the watchword. Now "articulation" is being bandied about. Whatever the name, designing a unified curriculum remains a persistent problem.

From time to time, teachers have introduced a variety of schemes as solutions to the problem, among them Project English. Most recently, the National Assessment (NAEP), a nationwide survey of American youth, has suggested an approach to articulation. The NAEP was not intended as a vehicle for integrating curricula, but in the process of making up the Assessment, leaders defined certain goals and left others unstated. Their omissions suggest ways for teachers to explore an articulated curriculum through children's trade books.

The NAEP was actually intended as a source of comprehensive national information on the educational attainment of young people. Before selecting exercises to be used in the survey a national committee of professional and lay people agreed on a set of objectives which they considered common goals of the school experience. Interestingly enough, the NAEP committee stated objectives in language arts (reading, writing and literature) in terms of process rather than product. For instance, for literature, the stated objectives for the literature component calls for exposure to a wide variety of high quality literature, engagement in, evaluation of and development of interest in literature of high quality. At no point do the NAEP objectives for these subjects suggest specific books, poems and stories.

Omission, as well as commission, has its effect. By omitting specific books, the NAEP avoided developing an examination like the 11+, once widely used in Great Britain. Teachers, therefore, do not have to prepare pupils for a national examination on literary selections which may or may not be appropriate for local pupils or curricula. It also means, at least at a national level, teachers are free to turn to literature that they know succeeds with children. They may select books which will broaden their children's world while capturing their interest. They may also take advantage of the thousands of excellent books available today to create a cohesive, articulated curriculum which unites language arts and content areas.

Children's books may be used in many ways to integrate language arts and content. Many individual books make excellent points of departure for studying a number of topics. Cleaver's book, Where the Lilies Bloom, for instance, can be used for exploring folk medicine or the special culture of Appalachia. Trade books may be used as supplementary reading when a text book is the central source of information. Children's books may also be grouped topically in a thematic unit so that children read individually while using many trade books as a primary source of information in a content area.

The thematic unit is a series of activities including reading, discussions, drama sessions, art workshops, games, writing, movies, all revolving around a single topic. As in the method suggested by Jeannette Veatch, [3] reading is individualized. Students are free to seek and select their own books or stories within the topic. They read at their own pace. The teacher may conduct individual conferences or form groups to teach skills.

But the thematic unit goes on beyond Veatch; a heightened oral interaction, not necessarily inherent in most individualized reading programs, grows quite naturally from the shared topic. In an article appearing in the English Journal, John Bushman and Sandra Jones [4] point out that the thematic unit allows children an opportunity to discuss ideas with their peers defending their own points of view and accepting criticism. Good and poor readers, alike, contribute something unique to the discussion since each book offers a difference perspective on the same topic. Information learned in one book is expanded by the information learned in another. Everyone can compare stories, characters, setting and ideas, making critical thinking a natural by-product. In the end, all participants have a broader picture of the topic.

The themes themselves can come from a number of sources. Sylvia Spann and Mary Beth Culp of the NCTE Committee on Thematic Units [5] use units like "Utopia...Dream or Reality", "The Hero as Superman" and "Grow Old Along with Me" for units at the high school level. In Topics in English [6] Geoffrey Summerfield uses "Predators", "Snakes and Reptiles", "Hunting" for use in British junior schools. Topics may also be developed so that they integrate language arts activities and content like social studies and science. In all cases, the resulting unit uses a wide variety of materials like poetry, music, art, fiction and non-fiction to explore a topic.

To illustrate what can happen in a thematic unit, a World War II unit is described in the pages which follow. The class which used the activities were a heterogeneously grouped 7th-8th grade class with reading ability ranging from about 3rd grade to adult level.

The unit began with a discussion of what actually happened in World War II while the class looked at many photographs from the period.[7] There were pictures of GI's going overseas. Some showed people huddled in the Underground in London during the Blitzkrieg. Others showed Germans sitting in a bunker. One picture showed a small Jewish boy, his hands up in the air a brawny Nazi towering over him as he directed a submachine gun at the child. After looking at the photos, the teacher and the group talked about conditions of life during the Second World War, including where the American soldiers went and what countries Germany and Japan attacked. The class also talked about Nazi anti-Semitism, about the Allies and the Axis, and about important events in the war.

Turning the discussion to the way people express feelings and ideas, the teacher asked the class to look at a copy of "Guernica", a painting by Pablo Picasso[8] which was completed after the city of Guernica was bombed during the Spanish Civil War. The children agreed that Picasso was trying to tell how he felt about the bombing. Conversation concluded when the teacher pointed out that the class could learn a great deal about history through paintings, poems or historical fiction. As an example, she described the background of And I Never Saw Another Butterfly (ed. by Tages Behfel)[9] and read parts of the book, which contains poems and pictures by Jewish children who lived and died in Terezin, a Nazi concentration camp.

The group then turned to historical fiction books dealing with the Second World War. A group of books selected according to several criteria was made available for use in the class. (See Bibliography of Historical Fiction Books. The list is divided into two parts: "Shared Novels" and

"Additional Novels on World War II Theme".)

Some books were chosen because they included experience of real people. The House of Sixty Fathers is a fictional interpretation of Meindert de Jong's actual experiences as a soldier in the American Army during the War. The Endless Steppe depicts Esther Hautzig's own life growing up in Siberia during the Second World War. Child in a Prison Camp faithfully depicts Takishima's own life in a Canadian prison camp for people of Japanese descent. Many others grew out of actual experiences of the authors or of people they knew.

Books were also selected so that individual reading experiences together provided a broad base of information gathered from stories set in a number of countries. Twenty and Ten, for instance, takes place in France. Transport 7-41-R occurs in East and West Germany. Summer of My German Soldier is set in the United States. Snow Treasure is a story about Norwegian children. The Upstairs Room takes place in Holland. There were stories set in Russia, Canada, China, Italy, as well as other places.

The books were chosen to meet individual differences in reading ability. Some books like Twenty and Ten, How Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit, and Child of a Prison Camp are easy reading. Others like Transport 7-41-R, The Little Fishes, When Jays Fly over Barbmo and Horses of Anger are more demanding. Approximate reading level ranged from third grade to twelfth grade.

There were books for every interest. Many had heroines as lead characters, The Upstairs Room, The Endless Steppe, Child of a Prison Camp to mention only a few. Others like Friedrich, House of Sixty Fathers and Horses of Anger had boys as central figures.

As the class read, the teacher found time to give children individual attention, helping some find books suited to their reading levels. Fortunately, everyone in the class could handle at least one book. If some had not been able to do so, the teacher would have turned to an easy picture book like Pierre Janssen's book, A Moment of Silence (See Bibliography of Non-Fiction Books), or she could have read a story to the child asking him or her to write a response using an approach commonly called language experience.

The teacher also helped individual pupils read critically. She encouraged them to verify the facts in their books through research. She asked them how they thought the author might end the story. She asked them questions which helped them evaluate the behavior of the characters.

All of the children were asked to respond to their stories in one of several ways. They could draw pictures or make mobiles or collages. They could write. They could act out scenes from their stories. All shared exciting moments in their books in small group discussions.

All the responses, particularly the discussions and drama, proved useful in a number of ways. Many children who had found their first selections less than exciting read others which they heard discussed and which interested them more. Some read more than one book. In fact, there was quite a run on several books, among them The Upstairs Room. (The most popular books are listed as shared novels in the bibliography.) Groups discussing parts of shared novels or acting out scenes helped each other note detail and read for deeper meaning. Drama improvizations helped the groups remember detail and explore feeling which must have been foreign to the children.

Even those children who read less popular books were able to participate in discussion, giving the talk a new perspective. While many read The Upstairs Room, only one boy read The Winged Watchman. The Upstairs Room is about a Dutch family who hid some Jewish children for several years in a bedroom in their farmhouse. The Winged Watchman deals with Dutch efforts to fight the Nazis through the Underground. Since both stories took place in Holland, the boy who read the second book was able to help the class understand the Dutch experience during the Second World War more deeply.

The children also used complementary books to compare for accuracy. Fireweed and In Spite of All Terror are examples. Fireweed is a tender story of a girl and boy stranded in London during the Blitzkrieg. In Spite of All Terror is about a girl, fresh from a London slum, who is sent to live in Oxfordshire with a professor's family. The children who read the two novels compared the information which describes the way London was being bombed. They noted that both books describe children being moved from the city to the countryside. The two books together helped to verify what was actually happening in England at the beginning of the War.

Because many of the stories took place in different parts of the world, the children understood the extent of the war more clearly. To help the class further; the teacher hung a large world map on the bulletin board. Each person who finished reading placed a pin in the map recording the location of the events mentioned in individual stories. As a further aid, the teacher also put a time-line on the bulletin board. The children recorded important events which they knew were factual and

which occurred in their stories. As a result, the class soon understood where and when the war was waged. They listed the countries attacked by Germany, the countries in which the underground was strong, etc. as follow-up.

While events were put in historical perspective, the teacher also helped the children evaluate the books as literature. In one group the pupils discussed books for story line. Greene's Summer of My German Soldier, Reiss' The Upstairs Room, Frank's Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl, Carlson's Twenty and Ten, Marilyn Sachs' A Pocket Full of Seeds, and Van Stockum's The Winged Watchman all tell about people hidden for various lengths of time. In some stories the characters found the tension unbearable, but in others, the characters were able to bear the stress. The teacher asked the class to compare the situations and decide which seem most realistic.

Whether the class discussed the books as literature or as sources of historical information, critical reading developed naturally because the pupils were reading books on similar topics. Throughout all discussions, the pupils compared, inferred, classified, interpreted, generalized and synthesized what they had learned.

An unexpected advantage developed because the teacher used historical fiction rather than history to teach the unit on the Second World War. The children became deeply involved with the characters in the books. They thought of them as real people whose behavior could be called into question. Discussion lead to clarifying values.

In Transport 7-41-R, one of the most popular books, a young girl travels in a boxcar from East to West Germany directly after the end of the war with a group of displaced people returning to their homes. During the trip she meets an old man who is travelling with his desperately ill

wife. He had promised the old woman to bring her back to their home in Cologne to die. When she dies on route, the old man, Herr Lauritzen, succeeds in hiding the fact from the others crowded in the boxcar moving at a snail's pace toward Cologne. The children who read the story questioned what the old man and the heroine should have done with the body. They also talked about why we are afraid of death and dead people.

When the group was finished reading and talking about their historical fiction books, they turned to a game, role-playing famous people involved in the Second World War. Each class member researched everything he or she could find on a famous person from the following list:

Franklin Roosevelt	Winston Churchill
General Eisenhower	Joseph Stalin
General MacArthur	Adolph Hitler
General de Gaulle	Harry Truman

Through classroom, school and public libraries, the group had access to the books which are listed in the second bibliography on informational books and biographies. Someone who had researched the person in question was selected from the group to answer all the questions which the class could pose about the famous person, his life, his personality and his accomplishments. If the pupil could not answer one of the questions the next person who had researched that leader's life took over. In a follow-up discussion, the teacher asked the children to place the information which they had learned in categories - the leaders of the Axis, the leaders of the Allies, men who were generals, political leaders, battles in which the famous had participated, etc.

In a final oral activity, the class played World,[10] a simulation game in which the children played that they were leaders of non-existent countries which became powerful and started wars. The game ends when the opponents stop fighting and sit down to the peace table. Follow-up discussion centered on hypothesizing the causes of the Second World War and wars in general.

Writing grow out of several oral activities. The children wrote "news items" which described events occurring in their books. The "news" was put together in newspaper format and "published" as a one issue newspaper, which incidentally was a novel book report. In another successful writing assignment, the children wrote opinions on the causes of the Second World War.

All in all, the unit on the Second World War was successful in a number of ways. The children learned how to gather information from many kinds of books. They used drama sessions to explore feelings and read for detail. They read stories critically comparing and questioning story line, character development, the reliability of the information they had read. They saw that their own historical fiction stories fitted into a larger historical framework. They synthesized the information they had learned well enough to express opinions on the causes of war. But the unit was most satisfying because the children were enthusiastic throughout. Many who are ordinarily disinterested in books read at least one novel. Some children read more than one book. Books like The Upstairs Room were very popular. In short, history came briefly to life for a few children in a unit calculated to improve reading ability, develop language, and make the class aware of a period in history.

There is no reason why similar units integrating language arts and content areas cannot be developed by creative teachers. Our national objectives in education, as stated in the National Assessment, encourage using a wide variety of children's books in elementary and secondary classrooms. The resulting marriage between language arts and content will be a happy one, producing a large family of interested informed readers.

FOOTNOTES

1. John C. Mellon. National Assessment and the Teaching of English. Urbana, National Council of Teachers of English, 1975. p. 76.

2. Vera Cleaver and Bill Cleaver. Where the Lilies Bloom. Lippincott, 1969.

3. Jeannette Veatch. Reading in the Elementary School. New York, The Ronald Press, 1966.

4. John Bushman and Sandra Jones. "Putting It All Together-Thematically". The English Journal, V. 64 #5 (May 1975).

5. Sylvia Spann and Mary Beth Culp. Thematic Units in Teaching English and the Humanities. National Council of Teachers of English, 1975.

6. Geoffrey Summerfield. Topics in English. B. T. Batsford, 1969.

7. Some excellent sources of pictures and general information are:

   Life's Picture Book of World War II, New York, Time, 1950.
   Colliers' Photographic History of World War II, Colliers, 1944.
   Nora Levin. The Holocaust; The Destruction of European Jewry. Crowell, 1968.
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8. Pablo Picasso. "Guernica." in A. Blunt. Picasso's Guernica. Oxford University Press.

9. Tages Behfel, And I Never Saw Another Butterfly. McGraw-Hill, 1964.

10. "World" c/o Interact, P.O. Box 262, Lakeside, Cal. 92040.

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