Research Based Strategies for the Classroom Part # 1

Effective Thematic Instruction

Effective thematic instruction involves using a theme as "conceptual glue" for learners, strengthening bonds to knowledge. This approach relies on teachers who have a strong sense of curriculum as a learning process and can see ways to connect learning with key concepts. The goal is to choose themes that relate to students' lives to ensure interest and engagement in the content. Concepts that work best depend on students' age and developmental level. Also, topics typically found in single content areas offer rich links to other subjects, such as communication, immigration, rhythm, speed, matter, addition, metaphor, or waves. Framing a theme as a question ("What Makes the Difference?", "Why Are We Moving?", or "How Do We Know?") will keep students asking (and answering) questions that matter. Effective teachers employ strategies that engage learners not just in ways that are exciting or fun, but that make strong bonds between abstract ideas and understanding.

Thematic instruction has been shown to increase student achievement (Beane, 1997; Kovalik, 1994). Effective instruction presents new information by reaching out to existing knowledge rather than presenting skills and facts in isolation.

Key Research Findings

• Use of networked technologies can enhance learning when students focus on solving authentic problems and address issues adults face in real-world settings (Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1997).

• Cognitive research shows that educational programs should challenge students to link, connect, and integrate ideas and to learn in authentic contexts, taking into account their perception of real-world problems. (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; diSessa, 2000; Linn & Hsi, 2000).

• Themes are a way of understanding new concepts. They provide mental organizing schemes for students to approach new ideas (Caine & Caine, 1997; Kovalik, 1994).

• Research on brain-based teaching explains that the brain learns, and recalls learning, through nonlinear patterns that emphasize coherence rather than fragmentation. The more teachers make

connecting patterns explicit and accessible for students, the easier the brain will integrate new information (Hart, 1983).

• Classrooms free of threat, students engaged in immersive learning experiences, and curriculum that connects to the community and the students' lives are all aspects of brain-compatible teaching (Caine & Caine, 1991, 1994, 1997a, b).

• Students learn through different modes, styles and multiple intelligences. Teachers should access and integrate these modes for increasing opportunities for students to access and retain new knowledge (Gardner, 1993).

• Student choice invokes critical thinking, decisionmaking, and reflection. When students are asked to select from alternatives, they are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning process (Beane, 1997; Caine & Caine, 1994).

Implementation

Thematic instruction is characterized by a range of distinct strategies. Teachers who incorporate thematic instruction employ research-based strategies such as:

1. **Choose authentic themes that matter.** Choosing themes that are authentic content connectors strengthens students' ability to build fluency between school subjects and apply them in real-world contexts. Select concepts or ideas that will blend disciplines and create bridges to new knowledge.

2. **Employ cooperative grouping.** Using small, cooperative learning groups to support problem-solving and cooperation.

3. **Design inquiry-based learning experiences.** Designing hands-on, "minds-on" activities help students make real-world sense of concepts by applying what they are learning.

4. **Provide for student choice.** A curriculum that provides students choices for demonstrating their learning will allow construction of new knowledge, engage individual students, and promote self-direction, autonomy, and collaboration (Bank Street College, 2004).

5. **Create a resource-rich classroom.** Provide a rich environment for exploring the theme in multiple avenues. Computers connected to the Internet, magazines, materials to experiment with, and tools for creating records of learning all enable elaboration of new knowledge.

6. **Connect to the local surroundings.** Extend the classroom into the neighborhood, town, and environment by integrating them into the curriculum in meaningful ways.

7. **Team with other teachers.** Collaborate with colleagues to bring good ideas into the planning process and create strong links to other disciplines by sharing content expertise.

8. **Provide timely feedback.** The real world provides authentic feedback, allowing us to internalize what success or failure looks and feels like. Feedback in the classroom should replicate authentic learning situations by being timely and instructive.

9. **Link assessment to real-world performances.** Use authentic performance assessments that ask students to apply what they understand in new ways.

10. **Use technology effectively.** Employ appropriate technology tools for students to explore ideas, engage in simulations, and make new connections.

Additional Resources

Bank Street College has identified six domains to describe fundamental aspects of teaching practice and provide a framework for analyzing teaching, called Action-Oriented Inquiry.
http://www.bankstreet.edu/tne/domains.html

Susan Kovalik has developed the Integrated Thematic Instruction (ITI) model for teaching with themes. She also shares research in this area. http://www.kovalik.com/ic.htm
http://www.kovalik.com/extsummaries.htm

Cross-Curricular Thematic Instruction, an article published on Houghton Mifflin's Education Place Web site. http://www.eduplace.com/rdg/res/vogt.html

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Developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Portland, Oregon.