

PROGRAM 5

Designing a Multi-Arts Curriculum Unit

Overview

The Learner Teams were introduced to a curriculum design process they can use to develop curriculum for their own classrooms.

Unlike traditional approaches to curriculum design, the process presented here focuses on the enduring ideas, also known as enduring understandings, that drive the curriculum — the “why” rather than the “what.”

The Curriculum Design Process

The following process can be used on your own or with other teachers to follow the same steps for investigating curriculum design that the Learner Teams used in Program 5. It is divided into four sections:

- Introducing a Model for Curriculum Design
- Creating the Enduring Idea
- Crafting the Enduring Idea
- Essential Questions and Unit Objectives

PROGRAM 5

Overview

This program engages participants in a process for multi-arts curriculum design that starts with the “why” (enduring ideas/understandings) rather than jumping ahead to the “what” (lesson planning).

During this session, participants first will analyze the *Quidam* unit of study to identify the enduring ideas/understandings, essential questions, and unit objectives. Then they will work collaboratively to write these elements for their own integrated arts unit of study.

Objectives

- Identify elements of curriculum design, including enduring ideas/understandings, essential questions, and unit objectives.
- Analyze curriculum for appropriate and significant enduring ideas/understandings, essential questions, and unit objectives.
- Collaboratively write the enduring ideas/understandings, essential questions, and unit objectives for an integrated unit of study.

Materials and Resources

- *Quidam* unit of study (Workshop Programs 1–4)
- Tinkertoys
- Handout: Developing a Unit of Study
- Handout: Indicators of Enduring Ideas/Understandings and Essential Questions
- Handout: Essential Questions Worksheet

Planning and Preparation

Read through this entire process, paying particular attention to the examples of enduring ideas/understandings, essential questions, and unit objectives in the *Quidam* unit of study.

Give the teachers who will be participating in the session an assignment. Ask them to bring a list of two or three ideas for a unit of study inspired by either a standard, a grade-level or school theme, or a shared interest. They also are to think about a subject area (e.g., language arts, math) and an art form (dance, music, theatre, visual art) that will be the focus of the unit.

Background Information for Teachers

This approach to curriculum design is based on the book and workshop series *Understanding by Design*, by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. Additional ideas were developed in the course through the national education reform project called Transforming Education Through the Arts Challenge (TETAC), which was funded by the Walter H. Annenberg Foundation and the Getty Education Institute for the Arts.

Vocabulary

- *Enduring ideas/understandings*: the big concepts about a theme or topic that students should comprehend and retain after they've forgotten many of the details (a *topic* is a subject; a *theme* is an idea about the subject)
- *Essential questions*: questions that guide teaching and engage students in uncovering the important ideas at the heart of each subject
- *Unit objectives*: knowledge and skills necessary for students to demonstrate their understandings of essential questions

Instruction

Warm-up/Motivation

Prepare a box of Tinkertoys so the number of pieces equals the number of participants. Include two or three pieces that are not a part of the Tinkertoy set and that cannot easily be connected with the other pieces.

Pass the Tinkertoy box around the room and ask each person to take a piece. Explain that everyone is going to help create an art object. Designate a person who will start the activity by passing her Tinkertoy piece to the person next to her. That person takes the piece, attaches his piece, and passes both to his neighbor. Each person in turn receives the object, adds a piece, and passes the assemblage onward.

There is one rule: No one is allowed to talk or write messages. When the last person has attached his or her piece, remove one piece and place it elsewhere on the assemblage.

Discuss what happened. Suggest that the teachers think of this activity as a metaphor for writing a unit of study. Ask them to describe the process, reflecting on what they observed and did themselves. As they talk, ask probing questions to explore the parallels with curriculum development. Possible questions include:

- Did the completed assemblage turn out the way you imagined it would?
- Why was there no common vision?
- Would anything have been different if you had been able to talk?
- How much planning and conversation usually is involved in writing a unit?
- How did you feel when the assemblage broke apart while one person was trying to attach a piece? Did anyone help out?
- What happened when one person changed what someone else had done, moving a piece to a different location? How did you feel about this?
- Were all people successful in contributing their piece to the total product?
- How did people solve the problem if their piece didn't readily fit (e.g., if there was not a spoke with holes available in which to insert a rod, if a person had an object that was not like the rest of the Tinkertoys)?
- In creating curriculum, does every suggestion always fit?
- What form did the assemblage take? Was it more linear or multidirectional? Did people use the spokes to branch off in different directions? Were some pieces more important than others?

- In a finished unit of study, which activities build sequentially and which branch off into related areas? Are all activities relevant and equally developed?

Introducing a Model for Curriculum Design

Begin the curriculum design process by asking the group the following questions:

- In your experience, how do you start writing curriculum? Where do you get your ideas? (Most will mention state and district standards, school focus, chosen topics, seasonal concepts, special community events, local themes, works of art, etc.)
- Once you get your initial idea, what process do you follow? What do you do next? (Most teachers will talk about moving directly into lesson planning — the “what.”)

Distribute the handout, Developing A Unit of Study. Go over it in its entirety, paying special attention to the enduring idea and essential questions. These are the “whys” of the curriculum.

Creating the Enduring Idea

In this first step, teachers will engage in the process of creating enduring ideas/understandings, using the multi-arts unit based on Cirque du Soleil’s *Quidam* as an example.

On a flip chart, write the enduring idea for the *Quidam* unit of study: **fantasy impacts our perception of reality**. Ask the teachers to think back over the instruction and identify places where they saw this enduring idea.

Explain that the creators of the *Quidam* unit began with the idea that they wanted to study a multi-arts work that had historical significance, that included technology, that lent itself to integrated curriculum, and that was accessible to a wide range of ages. Using these criteria, the team selected *Quidam* because it had a narrative, direct historical significance through the use of Surrealist precedents, important musical concepts, and abstract movements that raised important issues about the nature of dance. Thus, the team started their curriculum design process with a work of art. (Write the word “Quidam” on a flip chart. This is the start of a curriculum web.)

Next, the team brainstormed the ideas and messages that were apparent in *Quidam*. Ideas they identified included:

- reality,
- fantasy,
- children’s literature,
- circus,
- narrative,
- roles of the characters, and
- Surrealism.

On the flip chart, surround the word “Quidam” with these concept words.

Then the team wrote short phrases about each concept:

- narrative — takes the form of journey;
- surrealism — uses a historical style called surrealism;
- roles of the characters — each character represents reality or fantasy;
- children's literature — uses recognizable elements of children's literature such as *Alice In Wonderland* and *Wizard Of Oz*; and
- circus — has athletic feats that are fantastical.

Write these phrases on the flip chart next to the appropriate concept.

Then the team stood back and looked at the brainstorming. What elements kept coming up?

- Fantasy vs. reality
- What function does fantasy play in our everyday reality
- Fantasy changes reality
- Our fantasy lives change and help shape our reality
- Fantasy impacts our perception of reality

The last concept — fantasy impacts our perception of reality — resonated with the entire team. They tested the possible enduring idea by comparing it to indicators of an enduring idea developed by Wiggins and McTighe and found it met most of the criteria.

Distribute the handout, Indicators of Enduring Ideas/Understandings and Essential Questions, and discuss them with the group. Consider the application of these indicators to the enduring idea of the *Quidam* unit of study: fantasy impacts our perception of reality.

Crafting the Enduring Idea

Divide the teachers into small groups. In their groups, they are to share their various ideas for units of study and the related subject areas and art forms. They must decide on one idea they want to explore.

Next, each group engages in the curriculum design process they have just walked through:

- Brainstorm ideas and create a web of related concepts.
- Write phrases expanding on the concepts.
- Look for connections and overarching big ideas.
- Add concepts and remove those with few connections, working toward identifying a few key concepts.
- Craft possible enduring idea statements.
- Test these statements against the Indicators of Enduring Ideas/Understandings.

Share and discuss the completed work with all groups. It is probable that the enduring idea statements will still be in draft form.

Essential Questions and Unit Objectives

Refer to the definition of essential questions in the handout, *Developing a Unit of Study*. Point out that stating key concepts in the form of questions engages students in active inquiry.

Return to looking at the enduring idea brainstorming process for *Quidam*. Explain that the unit writers identified seven significant concepts. Continuing to work, they discovered commonalities among two or more of the concepts that could be used to link them. For example:

- Children’s literature sources, circus, and surrealism all are historical precedents.
- Narrative, roles of the characters, fantasy, and reality all are parts of a journey.

The team then tried to write questions that addressed all the concepts. The resulting essential questions were:

- How are fantasy and reality expressed in the arts?
- What is a journey and how is it used in the arts?
- How do historical precedents effect the meaning of art works?

Look at the handout, *Indicators of Enduring Ideas/Understandings and Essential Questions*.

Test the three essential questions for *Quidam* against these indicators. Ask the teachers where they saw these questions addressed in the *Quidam* unit of study.

The next step for the unit writers was to write unit goals and objectives based on the essential questions.

Review the handout, *Developing a Unit of Study*, for an explanation of goals and objectives.

Share the unit objectives that were identified for the *Quidam* unit. Analyze and interpret elements of fantasy and reality within works of art:

- Apply understandings of reality and fantasy to original art making.
- Identify and demonstrate the elements of the literary form of journey.
- Research *Parade* and *Quidam* in order to make comparisons and draw conclusions about how artists employ historical precedents.

Notice that unit objectives are broad ideas that reoccur throughout the unit of study.

Thinking about the *Quidam* unit, at what points do the learners:

- analyze and interpret elements of fantasy and reality within a work of art?
- apply understanding of reality and fantasy during art making?
- identify and demonstrate the elements of a journey?
- research and draw comparisons between *Parade* and *Quidam*?

Within each unit objective there are numerous skills that are taught within each lesson.

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These skills can be found in the Lesson Objectives of Program 2.

Distribute the handout, Essential Questions Worksheet.

Ask the teachers to continue working on their unit plans, now writing essential questions and unit objectives.

Test the essential questions against the Indicators of Essential Questions. Share the essential questions and unit objectives with the entire group.

Engage the teachers in a discussion about collaboration:

- How were decisions made in your groups?
- How will this experience translate in your school setting?
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of such a process?
- How does this process compare with the planning process your school engages in already?

End this session by saying to the group, “By now you must be thinking, ‘At last, we can start planning lessons.’ Well, not exactly. In Program 6 we will try something new and tackle assessment before we plan lessons.”

Handout

Developing a Unit of Study

Idea Generating

Topic, theme, standard, or works of art selected by faculty

Enduring Idea/Understanding

- What is the larger universal understanding that you want students to know about this theme or topic?
- Does the idea have lasting value beyond the classroom?
- Why study it?

Key Concepts

- What are the things that are important to teach about?
- What do students need to know about this topic?

Essential Questions

State concepts as questions to focus inquiry.

Unit Goals and Objectives

- What will students be able to do as a result of studying this unit?
- How will they demonstrate their knowledge of key concepts?
- How do your unit objectives incorporate the arts?
- How do your unit objectives integrate mandated district and state standards?

Assessment Planning

What assessment strategies will be used to measure student understanding throughout the unit?

Lesson Objectives

What knowledge and skills are needed within each lesson to accomplish the larger goals of the unit?

Adapted from McTighe, J. and Wiggins, G. *The Understanding by Design Handbook*.
Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1999. Used with permission.

Handout

Indicators of Enduring Ideas/Understandings and Essential Questions

Indicators of an Enduring Idea/Understanding

- If your syllabus or program were cut in half, you would still want students to explore it in depth.
- It is key to connecting and making sense of lots of discrete knowledge — it “connects the dots.”
- It is key to understanding other important ideas.
- It is unlikely to be fully understood by studying it just once.
- It is unlikely to be understood through textbook accounts only.
- There are different ways to study it, to teach it, and to apply it.
- It is not obvious, it is often misunderstood, but it is worth the trouble.
- It involves the kind of problems, challenges, and work that adults do.
- It is significant within the arts.

Indicators That an Enduring Idea/Understanding Is Not Specific Enough

- Different teachers cannot agree on exactly what is to be taught or emphasized in the unit.
- Different teachers cannot agree on what should be assessed.
- Students and parents cannot tell from the course or unit description exactly what is to be learned and how “success” will be determined.
- Students do not know what to study or how to study it.

Indicators of Essential Questions

- They have no one obvious right answer.
- They raise other important questions.
- They address the philosophical or conceptual foundation of a discipline.
- They are about concepts, not skills.
- They reoccur naturally throughout our lives.
- They are framed to provoke and sustain student interest.

Adapted from McTighe, J. and Wiggins, G. *The Understanding by Design Handbook*.
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Handout

Essential Questions Worksheet

Concepts to be taught

Commonalties among these concepts

Essential questions based on commonalties

How students will demonstrate their understanding of essential questions (unit objectives)