

Thematic Unit Planning in Social Studies: Make It Focused and Meaningful

Todd A. Horton

Jennifer A. Barnett

Nipissing University

[Return to Articles](#)

Abstract

Unit planning is perhaps the most difficult of the teacher duties to execute well. This paper offers suggestions for improving focus and increasing the meaningfulness of thematic unit content for students. Stressing the concept of a Big Understanding, it outlines 6 sequential steps in the creation of units which, when applied, not only establish a purpose for the study of the material, but also foster the growth of citizens who are self-actualized, learned, contributing members of a global society.

Unit planning is perhaps the most difficult of teachers' many duties to execute well. We've all heard the rules — the unit must have a strong introduction, a body of lessons that build on each other, and a conclusion that ties the threads together and leads to summative assessment. However, add to this the incorporation of various teaching approaches to meet different learning styles, a variety of engaging student activities some of which demand critical thinking and compound it all with an obligation to meet the requirements of the course curriculum and you get a sense of how difficult this task can be!

Much has been written on developing unit plans in social studies (Kirman, 2002; Wright, 2001; Case, 1999) and the accomplished works of these authors should be consulted by any teacher interested in gaining an expertise in unit plan development. Case (1999) notes thematic, narrative, issue, inquiry, problem or project approaches can be used as unit organizers. These organizational approaches to unit planning in social studies each have their strengths and we encourage trying them all over the course of a career to find what works best for teacher and students. For the purposes of this paper we centre our attention on *thematic* unit plans offering suggestions for improving focus and increasing the meaningfulness of unit content for students.

Establishing the Problem

As teachers know, unit plans are a series of day-to-day lessons related to a particular theme. The unit can take anywhere from a week to six weeks to complete (though term or semester long efforts do occur). Case (1999) suggests that thematic units can focus on places (e.g., Mesopotamia, Scandinavia, Peru), events (e.g., building the A-bomb, making the pyramids), eras (e.g., The Depression, post-World War II Europe), phenomena (e.g., biological change, war), concepts (e.g., freedom, democracy) or entities (e.g., multi-national corporations, United Nations, bears). We would add that thematic units can also have people (e.g., the Cree, Napoleon) as their key focus. However, a theme, no matter the type, is insufficient as the sole basis for planning a unit. Consider the following scenarios:

A grade 5 teacher pulls a slightly tattered binder off his book shelf. Contained within its jacket is a pre-packaged unit on Ancient Egypt he has taught for several years. He flips through the pages reviewing the unit overview, curricular connections, and blackline masters while reminiscing of past students re-enacting the death of Cleopatra, mapping the fertile soils of the Nile, and constructing pyramids out of sticks and clay. Though the memories are positive, an unexpected feeling of dissatisfaction sweeps over the teacher.

A Faculty of Education professor eagerly sits down in her favourite chair to evaluate student-created social studies unit plans. She opens the first submission and her eyes are instantly drawn to the title “Confederation: A Unit for Grade 8”. As she turns the pages she notes an interesting simulation of the Charlottetown Conference, a research activity on the Riel Rebellions, and letter writing in support and opposition of Newfoundland joining Canada. While the lessons appear strong, an uneasy feeling descends on her.

What both this teacher and professor may be feeling is a sense that the units are unfocused despite having a theme. Further, though both units seem to have engaging activities, one has to wonder if students truly understand why they are learning about Ancient Egypt and Confederation. Without clear explanation these units have the potential to be meaningless to students.

Authors of thematic units often select a topic from the curriculum and proceed to “dump” enormous amounts of information into each of the lessons. This is done in the misguided belief that thoroughness is achieved by teaching every possible aspect of the topic. It has been our experience that this applies to teacher-designed units as well as those produced by textbook companies, corporations, non-profit organizations and even ministries of education.

By approaching unit planning in this way, depth is sacrificed for breadth as each new lesson is an introduction to a different aspect of the topic. Students figuratively start to drown in information — names, places, dates and events whirl by at dizzying speeds. Engaging activities start to feel like “make work projects” and when students begin to perceive lessons as “pointless” interest and inspiration is undermined. The implications are enormous for student learning and attitudes toward social studies generally.

We can do better. Units are opportunities to address citizenship goals — the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that we as teachers, parents, schools, communities and provincial

and national leaders believe are important for children to learn to be “educated” citizens as well as contributing members of society. As such, we must develop thoughtful units that are coherent and focused as well as meaningful to students.

What Can We Do?

We understand that no teacher approaches the planning of units in exactly the same way and, to a certain extent, each teacher must find their own style. As well, we appreciate that teachers do not always develop unit plans from scratch, often adapting pre-made units to meet student needs and curriculum requirements. With this in mind, we offer six steps that will increase unit focus and manageability while cuing students to the “point of it all”.

Step 1: Limit the Scope of the Unit

Once teachers have selected a thematic topic embedded within their course curriculum they need to accept that no matter what they choose they cannot and should not teach everything about it. It is a simple fact — there is too much information available on any topic, be it global warming, Aztecs or the Underground Railroad. Additionally, there is more information than any grade four, six or ten student *needs* to know at any given point in their educational journey. This means that units need to be limited in scope. If creating a unit from scratch, consider exploring one or two aspects of the thematic topic in depth. If adapting a pre-made unit which races from topic to topic within the theme, consider excising some lessons and expanding others or incorporating the possibility of student choice (i.e., students must complete activities related to two of the six thematic topics and demonstrate their learning to the class in some manner).

Creating or adapting units in this way often require teachers learn more about the themes they've chosen. What a wonderful opportunity to expand one's knowledge base.

Step 2: Identify Importance

Deciding what aspects of the thematic topic to focus on can be difficult. While it may seem easier to try and do everything, decisions have to be made if we don't want to overwhelm or alienate students. We suggest writing the thematic topic down on a piece of paper and asking the following questions: *What is the point of teaching this topic to students? What makes this topic important?* These may seem like strange, abstract questions at first but the answers are critical for increasing focus and developing meaning for students. Many teachers simply accept that because a topic is in the curriculum it must be important. Others may believe that the answer is self-evident — knowledge of any sort is important in and of itself. Those responses would, we suspect, seem slight if offered to students, parents, or educational colleagues.

What makes any topic important is what it contributes to students' understanding of themselves and the world around them. Content is significant only if it is a window into understanding how we were, how we are and how we could be in the future. Something is important when it is a means by which one learns about various ways of “being” or living in the world, how we, as people, adapt, address, react, relate, develop, seek, conclude, destroy, conquer, vilify, etc.

For us, answering the question “what makes this topic important?” has meant learning about topics with a new mindset. For example, whenever we refresh our knowledge of the Incas or

Mayans we're struck by the many ways their cultures adapted to the environment in which they lived. Conversely, these peoples also shaped the environment to meet their needs or desires. This point is significant because it transcends the Incas and Mayans as it is applicable to all cultures no matter the time or place. We want students to know, understand and appreciate this aspect of life because it has relevance to students' lives now and in the future. This point can be taught *through* an exploration of the Incas, Mayans or any other culture required or suggested by the curriculum.

A second example is in order. One of the many important points that arise when we read about the structures and processes of the Canadian government is that groups of people, whether a family, class, tribe, city or nation, establish rules and policies for the order and "good" of the group. In addition, structures and processes are very dependent on the people involved and the history of the group itself. Unquestionably, the structures and processes of the Canadian government are similar to those of Great Britain due to Canada's history as a British colony. Canada's parliamentary democracy is intimately related to King John and the Magna Carta, the Glorious Revolution and Queen Victoria among other people and events. Again, the salience of this point is in its transcendence of the details of Canada's governmental structures and processes and application to other groups such as the United States and South Africa as well as students' families, their school or a local First Nation. The structures and processes of the Canadian government can be the "vehicle" through which students learn this significant point.

Simply by answering the question "what is the point of teaching this topic to students" or "what makes this topic important" teachers are on their way to developing units that have increased focus and meaningfulness for students.

Step 3: Create a "Big Understanding"

The answer to the above question is the formulated into a generalization. Known by various names including guiding statement, enduring understanding and over-arching statement, we have settled on "Big Understanding" as the name for these generalizations. Stated simply, Big Understandings are the significant and hopefully enduring points we, as teachers, want students to know, understand and appreciate by the end of the unit. Examples that we've used in the past include:

- Canada's climate is affected by a number of natural and human factors.
- Remnants of colonialism are still evident in the structure of the Canadian government.
- Women in Canada continue to experience sexism in the workplace.
- A major point in the evolution of Canada as an independent nation occurred during World War I.
- Race was constructed to "explain" differences in physical appearance, but associated meanings have also evolved which have been used to empower some and disempower others.

Composing an effective and workable Big Understanding can be difficult. It has to be vague enough to address multiple requirements from the curriculum but specific enough to give the unit focus and depth. The Big Understanding has to be broad enough to permit exploration of the complex layers of a topic yet narrow enough to be manageable for students at a given age and grade. Rarely can a teacher create a worthwhile Big Understanding on the first try. It usually takes several attempts and many consultations with the curriculum document to ensure that requirements are being met. To make the effort easier, here are a few suggestions

to assist in creating effective and workable Big Understandings.

- Keep the Big Understanding to one clear and succinct sentence if possible. Multi-sentence and long verbose statements with clauses increase the possibility of taking on more than can be managed within the time frame of the unit. Trying to do too much overwhelms students and undermines the “point of it all” being fully grasped.
- Write the Big Understanding in language that is appropriate for the age and grade of the students to whom the unit is being taught. The Big Understanding will be shared with students so teachers can relate lessons throughout the unit to the Big Understanding. This cues students to the point of the unit and enables them to make meaningful connections as the unit progresses.
- Include qualifying words (e.g., usually, often, almost) in the Big Understanding as appropriate. There are few generalizations that can be made that are *always* accurate and applicable to every context. The human aspect of social studies increases possibility of the exception. By avoiding absolute terms (e.g., always, every) teachers have latitude to note exceptions during lessons adding dimension to students' comprehension of the Big Understanding.
- While not absolutely necessary, a way to highlight the generalizability of the Big Understanding is to compose a statement without specific reference to names (e.g., Louis Riel), places (e.g., Canada), dates (e.g., 1848 or the 15th century) and events (e.g., Russian Revolution). By making the point in general terms, teachers can explore the Big Understanding using the content they are required to teach while being free to introduce other content that is also applicable. Connections between here and there, then and now are made and meaningfulness and relevance are enhanced.

Big Understandings can and we believe should be composed for teacher-created units as well as units that are pre-made and adapted by teachers. In both cases, students benefit from knowing the key point of the unit exercise.

Step 4: Conclude the Unit

For many people it seems counter-intuitive to begin developing (or adapting) a unit by considering the conclusion. Yet when a traveller plans the route of a road trip s/he always notes the destination first because everything else is dependent on the successfully concluding the trip at that point. It is exactly the same for unit planning.

Wiggins and McTighe (1998) promote the concept of “design down” for unit and lesson development. By starting the plan at the end teachers know where students will be going and what they will have to teach for students to arrive prepared for assessment and evaluation. Remembering that the key to the entire unit is the Big Understanding, teachers begin by considering what form of summative assessment is most appropriate. Whatever form it takes, be it a historical re-enactment, piece of artwork, multi-media presentation or pencil and paper test, the results must evaluate students' demonstration of their knowledge and comprehension of the Big Understanding. Further, teachers must consider the criteria to be used to judge the quality of student learning. By deliberating on these points, teachers can create (or adapt) a

summative assessment strategy that is truly reflective of students' understanding of the Big Understanding.

While it is not required, teachers can allow students to participate in decisions about the form of summative assessment to be used in the unit and the criteria by which the results will be judged. For example, teachers may allow students to decide between contributing work to a portfolio throughout a unit and selecting what they believe to be their best five pieces of work for final evaluation and writing an hour-long pencil and paper test in which students have the option of answering two of four questions. Allowing students to participate in decision-making processes is time consuming but as Schwartz and Pollishuke (2002) suggest it also infuses them with a sense of empowerment and control over their educational destiny while also helping to achieve educative goals such as the teaching of responsibility and critical thinking.

Step 5: Introduce the Unit

Once the end of the unit has been established teachers can turn their attention to the introduction. Save for the concluding lessons whereby the threads of the unit are brought together in a final reiteration of the Big Understanding, no other lesson is as important as the introduction. Here, teachers not only ignite student interest in the thematic topic — often called the opener or “hook”, but also communicate important information about the unit. Teachers need to tell students: 1) how student learning will be assessed, 2) the criteria by which student demonstration of learning will be evaluated or judged, and 3) the Big Understanding statement.

The first two points have already been covered so we'll turn our attention to the third. As stated in Step 3, the Big Understanding must be written in age and grade appropriate language so that it can be communicated to students. Teachers may still have students engage in introductory activities such as “pre-conception paintings” or the creation of title pages in their binders, but we suggest that the Big Understanding be part of this process and be prominently displayed for reference throughout the course of the unit. After all, this is the important point we want students to know, understand and appreciate.

As part of introducing the Big Understanding and beginning to “unpack” what it means, time needs to be allocated early in the unit for exploring key concepts found in the statement itself. Concepts are ideas which we use to organize and understand the world. There are concrete concepts (i.e., pen, table, chair) and abstract concepts (i.e., love, nation, democracy). The meanings of a concept are dynamic, multi-layered and contextual. Hughes (2004), Wright (2001), Case (1999), Martorella (1991), and Taba, Drukin, Fraenkel and McNaughton (1971) among others have written extensively on concept development and instruction in social studies and we encourage teachers to consult their works.

To illustrate the point we are making, the following is a Big Understanding created for a grade twelve American history unit:

- Official recognition of minority rights often involves individuals and groups challenging the accepted norms of society.

Here, it would be prudent for students to be guided through an exploration of the concepts of “rights”, particularly minority rights, and “norms”. In no way are we suggesting that by exploring key concepts in the Big Understanding, students will not already have some

understanding of them. Indeed, we suspect grade twelve students would have some idea of what rights and norms are; but one cannot assume. Students may never have heard of either concept before or may have undeveloped or erroneous understandings. Taking time to explore the key concepts in a Big Understanding establishes a base line of understanding among all members of the class, deepens meaning and complexity for some, and provides an opportunity to relate the concepts to students' experiences hence creating relevance for the entire enterprise.

Step 6: Build the Body of the Unit

We are ready to begin building the body of the unit. The lessons of the middle or body of the unit build on the introduction, scaffolding one on top of the other as they move toward the unit conclusion and summative evaluation. In addition, when deciding what to incorporate into the body of the unit a simple criterion is whether or not the focus of the lesson contributes to a greater awareness, comprehension and appreciation of the Big Understanding. Lessons and activities that do not enhance learning about the Big Understanding should not be included. This does not mean student queries that diverge somewhat from the lesson plan shouldn't be addressed if there is time — teachable moments can and should be embraced wherever possible — however, these should emerge organically from genuine student interest. Including lessons and activities into a unit whose primary feature is their entertainment value distracts from student appreciation and consideration of the overall message. Create or adapt a lesson that is fun and enhances learning about the Big Understanding.

Lastly, we would suggest that as the unit unfolds teachers explicitly relate individual lessons and activities to the Big Understanding. Guided questioning can help students make these connections for themselves and each other. Referencing of the Big Understanding cues students to the point of the unit and gradually prepares them to demonstrate their understanding of it when the time comes for summative evaluation.

Conclusion

At the outset we established that there are different types of units. One type, the thematic unit, has often been authored in less than exemplary fashion. We suggested steps to create or adapt thematic units that increase focus and make them meaningful for students.

Each teacher should take these suggestions and tailor them to the needs of students, individual teaching style and curriculum requirements. The steps, if implemented, should result in improved student interest and engagement. One can imagine that with limited scope and increased depth of study, the quality of questions asked, responses given, and engagement in activities undertaken will be vastly improved from the same found in thematic units that superficially teach, for example, a few facts about India or Captain Cook's explorations. That certainly has been our experience. Students may not recognize it but many of them will also feel a greater sense of security knowing what the point of the unit is, the form of summative evaluation being used and the criteria by which the results will be judged.

Meaningfulness grows and deepens over time. By creating opportunities to consider themselves, others and the world itself — past, present and future — through Big Understandings, students are better prepared to question, evaluate and debate thoughtfully and meaningfully. We, as educators, want to foster the growth of citizens who are self-actualized, learned, contributing members of global society. Small changes in our teaching

practice and thus the learning experience of students puts us on the path to helping make this happen.

References

Case, R. (1999). Beyond Inert Facts and Concepts: Teaching for Understanding. In R. Case & P. Clark. (Eds.), *The Canadian Anthology of Social Studies: Issues and Strategies for Teachers*. (Rev. ed., pp. 141-152). Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press.

Case, R. (1999). Course, Unit and Lesson Planning. In R. Case & P. Clark. (Eds.). *The Canadian Anthology of Social Studies: Issues and Strategies for Teachers*. (Rev. ed., pp. 289-308). Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press.

Hughes, A. S. (2004). Getting the Idea: An Introduction to Concept Learning and Teaching in Social Studies. In A. Sears & I. Wright. (Eds.). *Challenges & Prospects for Canadian Social Studies*. (pp. 236-246). Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press.

Kirman, J. (2002). *Elementary Social Studies: Creative Classroom Ideas* (3rd ed.). Toronto, ON: Prentice Hall.

Martorella, P. (1991). Knowledge and Concept Development in Social Studies. In J. Shaver. (Ed.). *Handbook of Research on Social Studies Teaching and Learning*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Schwartz, S., & Pollishuke, M. (2002). *Creating the Dynamic Classroom: A Handbook for Teachers*. Toronto, ON: Irwin Publishing Ltd.

Taba, H., Durkin, M., Fraenkel, J., & McNaughton, A. (1971). *A Teacher's Handbook to Elementary Social Studies*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Wiggins, G. & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by Design* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Wright, I. (2001). *Elementary Social Studies: A Practical Approach to Teaching and Learning* (5th ed.). Toronto, ON: Prentice-Hall.

[Return to Articles](#)