

THEMATIC UNITS ARE NOT JUST FOR LITTLE KIDS!

Developing Thematic Units for Older Students (Musselwhite, 2000)

Why Thematic Units?

Thematic units provide . . . well, a unifying approach to supporting literacy for older students, as well as for preschoolers and primary students. This handout specifically recommends using a narrative-centered thematic approach, in which a particular story or text is selected for multiple readings and extension activities (Norris & Hoffman, 1995). Many other books, poems, songs, etc. will also be used to support this central book, which is called the Book for Learning by Musselwhite & King DeBaun (1997). Following are just a few ways that thematically based learning can support students, including students with disabilities.

General Issues: Norris & Hoffman suggest a number of general advantages of narrative-centered themes, such as the repeated exposure to the same story, vocabulary, words in print, sound patterns of English, etc. Les Parsons observes that ". . . the use of themes allows [children] more easily to use their understanding in one area of the program to unlock and further develop their understanding in another.

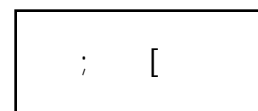
Vocabulary Support: Within a narrative-centered theme, the same vocabulary will be used in both familiar and changing contexts. This supports students with receptive and expressive communication delay or disorder — students who are at highest risk for literacy problems.

AAC Support: Students who use AAC devices typically have limited access to expressive communication, and few opportunities in class settings to practice using their devices. This thematic approach means that a core of words / symbols / icons can be used across multiple activities.

Support for ESOL Students: Galda and colleagues note that "Teaching through content themes helps provide strong contextual support for second-language learners" (1993, p. 389), citing a study by Allen (1986) to support this assertion.



Book for Learning



Words of the Week



Classroom Voices

What Themes Should We Use for Older Students?

Choose themes that are age-appropriate (e.g., doing chores), interesting (going to the mall), and functional (e.g., grocery shopping). Write sample themes appropriate for your students here:

What Types of Extension Activities are Appropriate for Older Students?

In her *Storytime* series, Pati King-DeBaun suggests using extension activities such as art, cooking, dramatic play, music, and reading. Most of these will be appropriate for older students as well, except that dramatic play should be modified to offer role play. Field trips for younger children will be changed to community activities for older students. See *Reading Activities Project for Older Students* (R.A.P.S., Musselwhite, 1993) for more ideas of extension activities.

References

Galda, L., Cullinan, B., & Strickland, D. (1993). *Language, literacy, and the child*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.

Musselwhite, C. & King-DeBaun, P. (1997). *Emergent Literacy Success*. Park City, UT: Creative Communicating.

Norris, J., & Hoffman, P. (1995a). *Storybook centered themes: An inclusive, whole-language approach — Interventionist's Guide*. Tucson, AZ: Communication Skill Builders.

Parsons, L. (1992). *Poetry Themes & Activities*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.