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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS: THE ISSUES OF RELEVANCE IN LITERACY INSTRUCTION

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I teach a course for practicing teachers in methods of organizing for literature response. In this course we study instructional strategies for helping students use literary response to build reading skills. Among the activities that the students engage in is creating a thematic unit in which multiple texts speak to a central question. I created this assignment because I observed that much of language arts instruction (particularly in the elementary grades) is centered around a theme or organizing principle, and further, that teachers are often given pre-packaged thematic curriculum in which neither themselves or their students are necessarily engaged. Because I was curious about this, in the spring of 2002 I conducted an inquiry into how preparation of a thematic unit might increase teacher satisfaction with it. I learned many things from my study of the process of 34 teachers' preparation, enactment, and assessment of homegrown thematic units. This paper focuses upon the idea of a theme itself, for I learned most clearly that it was the very construct of theme that determined the way it functioned in these teachers' classrooms.

To prepare for this theme creation assignment, students and I read a chapter about theming from Raphael & Au's text, *Literature-based instruction: Reshaping the curriculum*. In the chapter, Valencia and Lipson describe the promise and problems of teaching literacy in the context of thematic units. They define themes as "Big ideas . . . powerful concepts or generalizations written in the form of a statement rather than specific topics, particular texts, limited concepts, or genres" (102). They criticize the latter as worthy sometimes, fun often, but not the same as teaching thematic units, then go on to note that instruction around a topic—

springtime or animals for instance—is not akin to instruction around a theme. These topics, Valencia and Lipson argue, are largely links of convenience, rather than rich evocative links that spur critical thinking and complex learning. Valencia and Wixom urge educators to plan thoughtfully when they use themes so that quality texts converge upon sophisticated questions that may lead to dialogic consideration and thus, greater capacity for higher-order thought.

With this in mind, teachers set to the creation of a brief thematic unit where students would read a small number of pieces of high quality literature, engage in writing and oral discussion of those texts both in and of themselves and in relation to one another, and then culminate the unit with a piece of process writing that highlighted their understanding of the theme. The teachers were responsible for the creation of the theme, the delivery of the instruction, the assessment of student participation and learning, and the assessment of their own engagement with the theme.

My observations are based on teachers' impressions of the way the themes they created functioned in their classrooms. I used the teachers' written and oral descriptions of their own classroom practice to analyze the ways their thematic units contributed to classroom learning. In addition, I asked teachers to fill out a brief survey in order to organize my own collection of the data. My perusal of the survey data was what initially began my interest into which themes were effective and which were not. As all of the students used the criterion listed in Valencia and Lipson's chapter as a heuristic for creating their themes, I saw that there was an additional quality that set some highly successful thematic instructional experiences apart from others that were deemed adequate or less.

Themes are sometimes encouraged because they help children connect texts in *authentic* ways, yet it was my observation that the act of creating a theme didn't make it authentic. The themes that these teachers deemed successful were similar in that the teacher didn't stack the theme in such a way that he or she was certain of the answer. That is, the teacher

posed a question that he or she really wanted to know, put it in language appropriate for the classroom, and then selected texts that had something to say about that question. This sounds so simple, yet it is extraordinarily unusual to put out a question to a group of children that the adult hasn't yet solved. Virtually all of the problems and questions we offer for students are already mastered, and thus controlled, by the teacher. This is true in math ($9 \times 8 = ?$), science (Does a penny sink or float?), social studies (What were some key reasons for the civil war?), as well as Language Arts (Who is the protagonist and who is the antagonist in *The Giver*?). Certainly, we teach already known content so that children can develop skill sets and operational knowledge from which to build more sophisticated understandings and problem-solving skills. However, it is also important to teach children that most relevant skill—how to think about a problem where the answer isn't known. There is no greater authenticity.

Working in a theme-based curriculum where the answer can be any of a number of contradictory options is empowering and enriching for students and teachers.

Students

It takes a while for young students to believe a teacher would willingly ask a question without planned answer. When a teacher does this, however, the classroom is opened up in a most unusual way. Children are delighted by the knowledge that there isn't one answer—that there are in fact two or more and that we might all have to think long and hard, to read, write, and speak extensively before we are ready to make a decision. Students are used to the traditional form of instruction where the teacher has the answer and the child who gets closest to that teacher's answer is the most right. This form may be effective for problems with objective answers, but a different dimension emerges when placed in the context of interpretations of literary texts. Though lip-service may be given to reader-response models of literary learning (see Rosenblatt) much literacy instruction in elementary and secondary schools is

the traditional empty vessel (see Freire) model of instruction in which the student is filled-up with the knowledge of the teacher.

In this model of authentic theming, the teacher presents a balanced perspective on the question at hand by selecting texts that have perspectives both valid and varied. There should be no loading of ammunition on one side of a question to the exclusion of another. For example, a teacher may wonder whether humans are ethical in their relationship with the natural world. This theme is articulated through any number of high-quality fiction and informational texts that present varied perspectives on this question. The teacher offers the students the question, the texts, and the opportunity to test out their evolving interpretation of both the text and the texts' perspective on the large question. With the ability to push students' thinking in either direction, a teacher can equally support arguments from both side without overlaying his or her own perspective to the exclusion of others. This is not to suggest that teachers are unable to support that with which they do not agree. It is to say that the suspension of their own decision-making renders the task more interesting, more complex, and more authentic.

Teachers

The hardest thing for my teacher-students to do is to shift their stance from knower to learner. Though very few of them teach in a didactic style, they are most comfortable when they know what conclusions they want students to reach. When the teacher is authentically searching for answers, this comfort is disturbed. To be real and most relevant, the teacher selects a question or dilemma he/she wishes to pursue along with the students. It may be a question that has always been puzzling, a new angle on an old idea, or the introduction of a new kind of query. Karrie, a third year teacher in an ethnically diverse first grade classroom was concerned about the interactions some of her students had with cultural difference, particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy.

After much contemplation, she chose the question “Do similarities make people better friends?” to work on a month- long literacy unit with her students. She selected books that she could read to and with her students that explored friendships between highly similar—or very different—individuals. Together, she and I worked on a scheme that would help her and her students gather information about the question and come to conclusions based upon a synthesis of understandings from the texts and their own experiences.

At the end of the experience Karrie told me that her students had come up with a diversity of opinions and that she was still working on her own. She intended to use the theme again the following year and believed that suspension of her decision would keep her future students’ task as authentic as her current students.’ Karrie’s selected texts are listed in Table 1

Table 1: First Grade Unit: Do similarities make people better friends?

<i>The Rainbow Fish</i>	Marcus Pfister
Beautiful Fish finds sharing the bounty brings friends.	
<i>The Very Lonely Firefly</i>	Eric Carle
A Firefly is discontent until he finds those most like himself.	
<i>Chester’s Way</i>	Kevin Henkes
Chester and Wilson are quite comfortably alike: they confront a new friend who is very different.	
<i>The Brand New Kid</i>	Katie Couric
A class pokes fun at their newest member, a very different kind of boy, until they get to know him.	

Karrie selected four texts with four different perspectives on her question. By doing so, she gave all children an opportunity to examine arguments from all sides. She too was able to debate the issue

in her own mind as she worked with the texts and her students.

Julie, a ninth grade English teacher went through a similar pursuit with older children. She elected to ask the question “Is total freedom desirable?” and gather texts that addressed this. Her choices ranged from Shakespeare to Salinger as she looked for books that would help students engage with a question that she felt in the past they had answered simplistically. What made Julie’s choice of a question so compelling was the family struggle that prompted the inquiry. She shared with her colleagues in her Master’s class as well as her ninth grade students that her youngest sibling had left the family in hopes of a life free from entanglements. The sister had wanted total freedom to act without reverberations. Julie was confused by this and wondered about the possibilities. She hoped that she would learn from the books, her students, and herself in the pursuit of the unit. As Julie selected longer texts, she could only report on the first before the term ended. Thus, her analysis of the effect of the unit remains incomplete.

Table 2: Ninth grade unit: Is total freedom desirable?

<i>The Catcher in the Rye</i>	J.D. Salinger
Freedom from authority	
<i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>	Mark Twain
Freedom from convention	
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	William Shakespeare
Freedom from family	
<i>Brave New World</i>	Aldous Huxley
Freedom from government	

Conclusions

I hope to convince teachers to work with their students on authentic literacy tasks. It is exciting to think we can engage with our students in the exploration of important questions. The idea that

teaching and learning can be accomplished while exploring real questions for teachers as well as students is worthy of pursuit. I have argued that authenticity be broadly defined as questions that don't have pre-determined answers, that are asked and studied out of a real sense of intellectual curiosity. This modeling of interest and energy toward a puzzling question would be a rich heuristic for student inquiry into their own particular interests. Teachers teach by example most effectively; if we would like children to pursue tough, complex questions through the study of literature, we must model it.

This discussion has been based on a conceptual notion. Data-driven inquiries into the effect of thematic uses and the details of those themes are necessary for the field to understand the benefits and drawbacks of various kinds of thematic teaching in the language arts and across the curriculum.

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