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Take Your Students on an 'Intellectual Vacation'

By Dr. Jesse Goodman, Connections Senior Contributor, CFG Coach in Indiana, goodmanj@indiana.edu

In this age of standards and high stakes testing, it is becoming more difficult for teachers to respond to their own or their students' intellectual interests. While at one time, teachers were expected to make curriculum decisions and even to create curriculum units of study of a variety of topics, today's teachers are encouraged only to "hit" standards. Unfortunately, the current environment leads to what some call the "skipping stone" curriculum. Like a stone skimming across the water, the goal is to "hit" as many standards as possible within a given time frame. Rarely are teachers, today, encouraged to thoughtfully consider what they are teaching in their classes. Getting students "through" the curriculum as quickly as possible seems to be the current goal of our political leaders.

Given the current conditions in our schools, perhaps the best we can do is carve out a few hours during a given grading period to select topics, develop curriculum themes, obtain interesting materials and resources, and plan learning experiences that will intellectually engage our students. One strategy is to schedule about 3 hours a week (e.g., three 1 hour time blocks) for two to four weeks, and teach students what I like to call "classroom-based" (as opposed to textbook or test-based) curriculum units. Many times these units can be on topics that are related to conventional curricula, but takes students in a slightly different journey.

For example, if teaching about World War II, we could teach a related unit on "The Homefront" which would explore such themes as: food (ration cards, victory gardens, popular dishes, innovative preparation), clothing (e.g., styles, where made, fabrics used, types of shops), entertainment (e.g., popular music, movies, radio shows, games, books, vacations), work (in and out of the home), changed roles of women, significant national events unrelated to battles, dating rituals, education (e.g., examples of curriculum, classroom size, rules and punishments, schools), transportation (e.g., types of autos, trains, airplanes, boats, buses, roads), work (type, laws governing, factories), medicine and illness, famous crimes, treatment of Japanese Americans, and life of other marginalized citizens such as Blacks, Latinos, and children. These types of themes could, of course, be used for any history unit.

The goal of these classroom-based units of study would be to emphasize children's powers of inquiry. Instead of emphasizing the short-term memorization of facts, the goal in the above example would be to challenge the students' powers of imagination, speculation, and analysis. The central question would be: What was it like to live in the United States during WWII? In developing these units, it would be important to diversify the resources and activities. Some children learn best by listening to lectures, some by having discussions, others by looking at films or photos, still others by engaging in role plays, games, simulations, or learning centers, and/or going on field trips. By diversifying the learning materials and activities of a unit, students will naturally gravitate to those resources and activities from which they learn best, thus individualizing your curriculum. Instead of rigidly predetermining what will be learned, leave some room for student inquiry. Let them teach you what it was like to live (as a child,



parent, woman, person of color, war veteran, young man deemed unfit to fight) in the U.S. during WWII. Instead of over-emphasizing assessment through tests, consider other options such as papers, roleplays, and art projects as ways for students to manifest what they have learned. As the teacher, think of assessment as anthropological. As students learn about the topic, your job is to discover what they are learning through discussions, interviews, and observations, as well as their written work.

In selecting topics, take your students' interests into consideration, but also your own. I've known teachers to teach very substantive units on topics that on the surface seem silly. For example, one elementary teacher I know taught a unit on chocolate. This unit explored several "themes" such as: its history, ingredients in chocolate candy, the geography and growing of coca plants, types of chocolate (including unsweetened chocolate), health issues related to it, the digestive system, chemistry and wrapping of chocolate (how to preserve it), its psychological effects (why so many of us love it), and types of jobs connected to the production and selling of chocolate. This teacher also had students look at popular chocolate candy from the 1950s and today, as well as study the price of candy during this time period. She ended the

unit with a chocolate festival where students showed their parents the chocolate products they made in the school kitchen.

I've known teachers who have developed these units on other topics in which they have an interest. One teacher taught a unit on bicycles. He was a cross-country bicyclist, and knew much about this machine. Again, he taught lessons on its history, mechanics (its parts and how to put a bike together), physics (laws of motion, friction, and gravity), reasons for owning and riding (e.g., pleasure, racing, transportation), books and stories about bikes, significant events in history involving bicycles (e.g., the Wright brothers), and types of bikes among other themes.

In each case, the goal of these units was to have children intellectually engaged in the study of a topic. The emphasis was on encouraging student exploration, speculation, synthesis, and analysis of ideas and information rather than the memorization of details. As one of my former students once said, these units "are like taking an intellectual vacation from school." So, do it now. Take your students on a short but meaningful intellectual vaca-

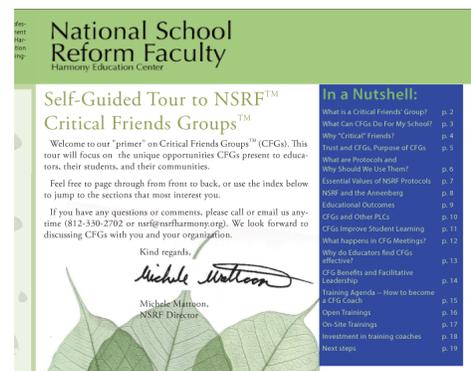


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