

Integrating Language Arts, Social Studies, and Technology Through a Concept-Based Curriculum

Teacher Profile

Mackenzie McNickle is a teacher in Gainesville, Florida. She teaches in a general education inclusion classroom that includes gifted students. Her current teaching assignment is third grade English language arts and social studies.

Concept-Based Curriculum

A concept-based curriculum, based on the principles put forth by H. Lynn Erikson, focuses on concepts, rather than content. A traditional curriculum puts forth a set of facts; a concept-based curriculum teaches content in the context of universal concepts that help to cohesively tie together information for deeper understanding.

Interdisciplinary Approach

Since concepts are universal and transcend multiple disciplines, tying in several subject areas is essential to developing an effective concept-based unit. Rather than traditional curricular units, which compartmentalize subject areas, concept-based units form cohesive links between academic areas.

Steps in Developing a Concept-Based Unit

1. Determine content to be taught
2. Decide on a concept
3. Develop interdisciplinary ties
4. Determine a culminating project

Choosing a Concept

With stringent curriculum standards in many districts, it is necessary that most teachers begin with the content and then match a concept to that content. A brainstorming worksheet can help to clarify ideas. Looking at lists of concepts used by the International Baccalaureate program can be a great starting point.

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| Form: What is it like? | Function: How does it work? |
| Causation: Why is it like it is? | Change: How is it changing? |
| Connection: How is it connected to other things? | Perspective: What are the points of view? |
| Responsibility: What is our responsibility? | Reflection: How do we know? |

International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme

Selecting Literature

Integrating high-quality children's literature into a concept-based unit can be a great way to bring in other disciplines and to help clarify concepts for the students.

Case Study: Economics

For my economics unit, I focused on the concepts of value and wants and needs. I integrated several children's books into the unit to highlight the concepts. Carefully selected books highlighted situations in which characters had to balance their needs with their wants. The students explored the concept of value through discussing trade or barter scenarios. For example, students were presented with a situation in which a tomato farmer and a lumberjack desired to trade their goods. Students were asked to develop a fair price or trade ratio (e.g., two tomatoes for one log of wood). Through this activity, I prompted them to develop reasons for why one good is more valuable than the other, and also prompted them to think about when it may be the opposite (e.g., environmental conditions affecting tomato growth, rarity of that type of wood, recent natural disasters affecting homes or crops).

Another fulfilling discussion emerged after reading the book Sweet Potato Pie by Kathleen D. Lindsey, in which a poor, Dust Bowl-era family saves their farm after having success selling sweet potato pies at the county fair. The question that I posed to the students was simply, "Do you need money to start a business?" which was meant to evoke thoughts about value and entrepreneurship.

Economics Unit Literature

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| Sweet Potato Pie by Kathleen D. Lindsey A Chair for My Mother by Vera B. Williams Those Shoes by Maribeth Boelts The Berenstain Bears' Trouble with Money by Stan and Jan Berenstain |
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The Berenstain Bears' Dollars and Sense by Stan and Jan Berenstain
The Berenstain Bears' Get the Gimmies by Stan and Jan Berenstain