

Units of Study for Teaching Reading
A Workshop Curriculum, Middle School Grades

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Question: *What advice do you have for teachers as they begin planning instruction?*

Mary Ehrenworth:

When you go to plan with the units, especially if you're a teacher who's a newer teacher, or newer to teaching units of study, or newer to teaching our units of study, there are some things that are probably worth knowing before you get started, because what you don't want to do is have someone just give you these and say, "Good luck with that." That doesn't fill you with joy. Instead, one of the things to first think about is if really you want to be in the kind of school where nobody plans alone, like the work is too big and it's too deep, it's not the kind of thing that you want to be alone at Starbucks or alone at your house trying to figure out how will things go. If at all possible, you want to get together with some teachers on your grade level and say like, "Okay, let's help each other plan." Ideally, a few weeks before the next unit.

In writing, I think it's fine to be planning a writing unit a week or two before. I actually like that sometimes because we can look back over the writing that we did in the last unit and then we can even look at some of the on-demand writing or their most recent drafts. And then we can be saying, "Okay, in the next unit, "we know what we were planning, "but is there anything we want to adjust?" And I feel like it's find to be doing writing units maybe a week or two before, and usually to get ready for a writing unit, and sort of preview the writing progression and writing pathways, I think what kind of writing we're doing, there's a lot I can do to get ready right before I teach.

But the problem with reading units is if you wait until right before to plan a reading unit, sometimes you'll go to teach the unit, and you don't have any books for it. So I think it is worth saying, let's take a look at our overall year first and think to ourselves, so like if I'm thinking about six grade, the first thing I'm thinking is, "Okay, so, "I want to start the year with a deep study of character, "and then I want to be going into a nonfiction unit, "and then I want to be going into social issue book clubs, "and then I'm probably going to be going into fantasy reading." So then if that's what I want to do, that's still hypothetical unless I make sure we have the books for this. It's good to involve kids in getting books. There's a lot of great research that shows that the more involved kids are in getting books, the more likely that they are to keep getting books outside of school for the rest of their life. So it's good to have them involved. At the same time, you can't just rely on all your kids to come in with the books for book clubs, so it is worth thinking first like how will my year mostly go? And then because of that, what kind of book orders do I want to do? What books do we already have in the building? What books, you know, what books do we still

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need to get? Where I am going to get those? What reading levels are my kids so that I make sure I'm matching up books. So that's the first thing is, I think for reading, you want to look a little bit across your year.

Then the next thing that I think was, like, so let's just imagine that you're starting with, say, a deep study of character and then you're going into the power of nonfiction, I'll just show you how I might think if I were in your school as staff developer and we were going to do a little help with planning. It might sound like maybe there's three or four of us, hopefully, if we're a large school, maybe there's five or six or seven of us. If it's a small school, maybe sixth and seventh grade have gotten together to do some planning together 'cuz you need some thought partners. Or maybe we've gotten another middle school to come over and we're going to do some planning together. So we're not going to do is in this one hour that we have together, we're not going to literally sit here and read this book. It's not meant to be a, a script and it's not meant to be that every word in here is going to come out of your mouth. Instead, what we're going to do is think how will these resources start our planning at a higher level, and then help us be prepared to teach across the week.

So the first thing that I would actually do is I would skip ahead to this little orientation to the unit. And the reason for this is if you're going to teach a unit at all, you want to know why. Like if someone says to you, and you should be able to do this, so if parents are saying, like, "Why are we teaching, why are you doing that unit?" You're going to do a curricular night, or you want to say to colleagues, "Why would we want to do this unit?" you basically want to be able to give a little key note. You know, and a good answer is not because TC said so, like no, like you need to sort of think about it. We'll give you, so we've done here is in the orientation to the unit, we've given like a little key note, a little bit of like what's the research behind this, why do we think this is so important, so for instance, in the "Tap the Power of Nonfiction," you'll find out a little bit in here about Nell Duke's research around nonfiction reading and how critically important it is for kids' academic success. You'll find out how it's actually keeping kids from succeeding in some of the other disciplines. And that, as much as we would love if social studies and science had a lot of time and expertise in teaching nonfiction reading, we know that, frankly, we probably have to give some of our time in the English curriculum to get that started because we are at least the teachers of reading and writing, like, we are committed to that. So you'll find out about that in the keynote, and then you'll also find out a little bit about why we believe it's important to start kids in actual nonfiction books and not articles. So all of that might happen in the orientation, and that would be worth reading.

And then you'll see there's a little bit of getting ready that we'll talk a little bit about what books we most recommend, it will send you to some digital resources where there's lists of the books that we think we would love to have in kids' hands. And of course you could make different decisions, but it will help you get started. Then, so

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you've got that going, so maybe we, like, we divide up and she reads the orientation and you read the getting ready, and then you read this little bit about like for content teachers. Meanwhile, somebody should go to the digital sources and just, like, begin to print stuff out so we all have a little folder of like, oh, what are some of the articles that are available that kids might read? What are some of the charts, what do they look like? And maybe we're not even printing them, maybe we're just previewing them, like we pulled them up on our iPads or our computers, so we're ready to say like, "Oh, we're going to "want that chart for when we teach that lesson," or "That's a really cool tool for small group work." Otherwise what happens is, you get to this day when you're saying like, "Oh, I'm going to "do the whole session today, I'm going to "teach the mini lesson and I really like the small group," and I go to do the small group and I say to kids, so and I'm like sort of skimming it really quickly, and I was like, "Readers, I've been thinking about you, "and what you might be ready for next, "and there's a tool I think that would really help you." And then I realize I never printed it, so then it's like, "No, nevermind. "We'll be doing this tomorrow." Like instead, you want to have that stuff ready because one way we try to help you is we've come to realize that charts and tools can be really, really helpful for kids. So I would say somebody probably wants to print the digital resources.

And then, basically, if you look on the inside cover, you'll see that there's been a lot of strategic thinking with a lot of us thinking together to think through like, what might a series of mini lessons look like that go together, that keep kids on a sort of one line of thinking, that they feel like they're doing shared work? And meanwhile, you've got all these different levels of readers in the class, and sometimes we see that when teachers are going off to do small group work, it begins to feel like, okay, the unit was this, but these kids are doing something totally different. And what happens is, you lose cohesion, and you'll lose the sense of that we're in this together, that we're in a community of readers, so part of what we try to think through is what can the line of small group work look like that will help kids move up levels of complexity, that will help kids with their writing about reading, that will help kids with their partnership work, meanwhile having it feel like it's still tied to or tethered to, at least, to the overall work of the unit of study. So, that I think is worth looking through and sort of getting a little preview of like, okay, here are some of the small groups. How might our kids really benefit from these? And then, if you've done that kind of previewing, you've previewed the unit, dah dah dah dah.

We've really tried to make the books leaner. We do understand that we're wordy, we do get that. And when I talked about the wordiness, when I talked to Lucy about it recently, once thing she said that helped me understand it is she said that, she's trying to create units that the strongest teachers will be able to grow into. Like, it would be really easy to make a toolkit for a first-year teacher who's never taught reading and have it be super, super lean. But then two years from now, that wouldn't be useful for her, so instead what we've tried to do is to create tools that will help you grow, and listen, you don't have to do all the parts of this at the beginning. Or you can approximate it, or it might sound a little different in the

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beginning, and then gradually you'll outgrow this and this unit, we'll be learning from you.

And we'll be creating new stuff too, from the work that you're doing. So in the beginning, what I would suggest is preview the unit, just the welcome to the unit. That's going to take you like 15 minutes. And then there's a letter at the beginning of a bend. We did realize that sometimes it's hard to have, like, a prelude to every, every lesson. So if you read the letter at the beginning of the bend, that will help you get oriented to the read aloud and the mini lessons for that bend. Then, okay, then now you're looking at like six or seven pages that you could just skim that night and say like, oh, how might it go? In the digital resources, you'll see we've done things like, for the read aloud, we've given samples of how we mark up the text so that that will help you. We've given you the text themselves that will help you get started. So all of that will just help you sort of start your planning at a higher level.