

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

FAQ Video Transcripts

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Question: *What are some of the ways the units support powerful reading instruction?*

Mary Ehrenworth:

So let's talk about why you might want to do these units of study, because the truth is, on the one hand, we don't care if you do our units of study. We just want you to have a really beautiful reading workshop. What we have tried to help you with, and this is why we're a not-for-profit research think tank at Columbia University, is that the thing that we really want, is that we want to save you hundreds of hours of planning, and start your planning at a higher level. Having taught, way back, I remember when I first started to do middle school, which was many years ago, and the only book I had, like a lot of us, was Nancie Atwell's gorgeous "In the Middle", and it was like, it was like, I don't even know, it was like my Bible or my Koran. I opened it up every day and said "What would it look like?" And that really helped get me through my first couple years of workshop.

But meanwhile since then, we're trying to do these really specific, detailed units, that help not just this child, but this child, and this child, and this child. Most of our classes have 28 to 36 kids in them, and we need to know each of them as readers and move them forward, so it really is helpful if you have tools for that. So in terms of things that might be helpful for you, I'm going to share what our pilot teachers have said has been most helpful. Because of course we have hundreds of classrooms that are side-by-side with us figuring out this work together. Most of what we do is work with really beautiful teachers, and then try to figure out how to democratize that work to save all our teachers hundreds of hours of planning.

Okay, so the first thing that in middle school has been really significant has been that we got a lot of feedback from teachers that actually, saying for read-aloud plans things like "Be at page 12 by Wednesday when you're on session three," is actually not that helpful, that it's actually really, really helpful to think through how read aloud will be a strategic force. And I do believe, I think all of us believe, that read-aloud is the anchor of reading workshop. That it's in your read-aloud that you are introducing strategies to kids, or giving them repeated practice. But even more important, in read-aloud, it's not just about what you say. You get to listen to the kids, and so you get to get the sense of, "If this is what I imagine they would say, "what's the distance between the reading work I imagine they would be doing, and what they're actually doing?" So read-aloud is this incredible place where you're also doing very fast, on-the-run research.

So one thing that we've done now for the units is, we've taken for each essentially bend of a unit, and if we think about our units, the way they go is, usually the first

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bend in either reading or writing is a sort of introduction to the genre and getting kids into the work. And then bend two is almost always raising the level and going deeper, and bend three is about doing the work with more independence. So this time, we really thought about launching with a read aloud where it's like you give a little mini keynote on "Why would we be doing this? "Why would we be reading historic fiction? "Why would we be in dystopian book clubs? "Why would we do a deep study of nonfiction?" And you give a little keynote, and you launch with a read aloud that gets the kids going with the work. We've tried to help you with the read aloud then, with not just what are some of the prompts, and we've even done sharing some of what our marked-up text looked like, but also with some of the predictable feedback that you have ready for kids. So could you choose a different text? Of course you could, I mean, this is in your hands. But you might want to' at least look at the read alouds that we've marked up for you as a place to start, because a lot of thinking work goes into them.

And then, sort of parallel with the read aloud, our series of mini lessons. And one thing that gets actually, really hard for us in middle school and in high school and secondary, is that we just don't have time to do read-aloud everyday and mini lessons everyday. I wish we did, I wish it was like elementary school where you had that time, so instead the way we think about it that we read aloud, almost always short stories, sometimes really beautiful illustrated picture books, and every now and then, a video. But most of the time it's going to' be some kind of short story that's just above the level that most kids are reading. And that short story is deeply grounded in whatever genre it is that we're doing in our unit. So for instance in historical fiction, we're starting with a short story by Walter Dean Myers called "Patrol", which is a short story about a young man who's gone to Vietnam to be in the war. So basically we begin that story and read aloud, and then what's tricky, this is why the planning is so complex and fascinating, is you want to launch the work in the read aloud, and then, probably we'll have two, or three, or four mini-lessons that use that read-aloud text in the mini lesson. Going back and giving kids deeper practice, doing some of the strategies at a much deeper level, and then we go back to read aloud, and then we do another series of lessons. And that would probably be one bend of the unit.

So what's tricky about it is, you have to look ahead to say, "I don't want "to eat up the terrain of my mini lessons "while I'm in the read aloud. "I want the read aloud to kind of get the kids "stirred up to want to do this work." Meanwhile, that in the mini lessons, we're going back and using that same text, with every now and then, you'll also introduce a video in a mini lesson, just because you can do some really, really beautiful work with video, and I think it increases engagement. So part of this is thinking about the relationship back and forth between those. Then while that's going on, we're also trying to help teachers with the work of conferring in small group. And this is some of the work that I think I learned an enormous amount from actually working in the Primary and upper Elementary units of study, which is that, I feel like when I first got into teaching I spent all my time planning my mini lessons,

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and I was so worried about the mini lesson going really well that I would devise these really gorgeous mini lessons, and the problem with them was, it took me 45 minutes to plan them, and I was going to give them in 12 minutes. And because I had taken all that time to plan the mini lessons, I had no plan for my conferring in small group. And I was trying to essentially invent these in the middle of workshop. So I'm watching some reader trying to figure out what a high leverage conference would be.

So now I almost never do that. Instead, I try to go in with a plan for the mini lesson, and I've already figured out what some predictable small groups and conferences can be, which means I can have tools for them. So a big thing we've tried to help you with, and if you have the time, listen. Lucy says that in the first year of your work, you might want to just get really good at mini lessons. And I think that makes sense, because if you get really good at pedagogy, that undergirds all the rest of your instruction. And then she says in the next year, you might want to get really good at small group work and conferring. And in the third year, get really good at assessment. And then, then you're off and running and you'll be able to make your own units as well with a lot of beauty. But meanwhile, I think that this is one thing that we've tried to help teachers with is, you don't have to wait to watch all your readers, to know that there are predictable ways that they'll struggle, and predictable ways that they'll be ready for next steps. We've done it by researching, we do a lot of researching in pilot classrooms. But also when you've been in the reading work a lot, you can predict it. So part of what we tried to do is get you started with some read aloud work, plan a series of mini lessons that goes back to the read aloud. Then meanwhile have a strand of small group and conferring work that you're already planned for and already have tools for.

Which means, this we definitely learned from our Primary buddies, and it turns out charts and tools are not just for primary teachers. In fact, it's been one of the things that's been helping our high school teachers the most. It's been so beautiful. And it turns out that if you have some charts and tools already ready, then your small group work, then your conferring, then your mini lessons, they're just all more efficient and they're at a higher level. Especially 'cuz with small group work, you want to start the kids off and leave them, so it might sound like, "Readers, I've been thinking about you, and I have some work that I think will really help you. I've also brought a little tool with me, and it's a little bit of a little mini progression that I thought you might look at your reading notebook with." Da, da, da. And then you can leave them while you go to another group, whereas if you come empty handed, it's a little bit hard to leave a small group and you're sort of staring at them and not getting to other kids. Then meanwhile for this all to work, you also have to think a little bit about What are the kids doing in their reading notebooks? So we've been collecting sample notebooks for years. Over the last two years we've really been looking at that, trying to think about the ratio of, if we want kids to read for about 90% of the time and write about their reading for about 10% of the time, at least in reading workshop, 'cuz this is not a writing unit, it's a reading unit. What's the work

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that kids can do in, if they read for 40 minutes, they write for four, five. So, thinking a little bit about the work of writing short and long, like what does it look like in their annotations.

And so you'll see in the units of study that actually we've done a lot of thinking and a lot of very explicit instruction on reading notebooks and what that could look like, as well as partnerships and clubs. Because it turns out when kids first start out, in reading and in writing, frankly, that when they go to partner work they don't really know how to do it really well. So they talk to each other, but it can often be pretty low-level talk. So that means we did this time, we started it in the writing units and now we added to it in the reading units, is that there's a curriculum for partnerships. A sense of, how do you coach kids to develop a more literary discourse. Knowing that frankly, no matter what kids' first languages are, all our kids are becoming multi-literate, and one of the literacies is going to be academic discourse, which is going to be new for our kids. So the units are helping you with this, what is a pretty complicated nexus, so that you can go in pretty planned for all of these. So that you can teach with a lot of efficiency and a lot of power.