

1-1-1993

Interdisciplinary Thematic Literature Studies

J. Lea Smith

Holly Johnson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Smith, J. Lea and Johnson, Holly (1993) "Interdisciplinary Thematic Literature Studies," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1605>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

**INTERDISCIPLINARY THEMATIC
LITERATURE STUDIES**

J. Lea Smith and Holly Johnson

"I really love this book! I want to read all the time, even on the bus."

— Stacie, grade 7, during a thematic literature study.

For many of us, reading is a pleasure. Give us a book and the adventure begins. With so many places to go and people to meet and so much to learn through reading books, it seems unfortunate we cannot "live" in a book longer or more often. Yet, we must leave our literary paradise, if only for the eight hours it may take for us to "do what we have to do."

Young people, too, have things they must do, and one of those things is attending school. Wouldn't it be constructive if we, as classroom teachers and readers, could take our captive audience on the same adventures we're dying to get back to after our work is done? Wouldn't it be resourceful to see children use a book not only for its pleasure potential but also for its learning potential? One could argue that this is what textbooks do. But, we ask, when was the last time any of us or our students read a textbook for pleasure?

Unfortunately, in content studies, textbooks are frequently the only reading material most students use. While some students may enjoy reading a textbook, many do not. Textbooks are often too difficult, and they tend to break knowledge into formal clusters of information that do not encourage reader interest, content acquisition, or meaningful retention (Kantor, Anderson, & Armbruster). They approach content topics in a general way which tends to offer limited opportunities for an in-depth study of a particular topic or theme (Moss). In contrast, narrative texts such as children's fiction promote student interest and increase learning in content classrooms. Children's literature used within content study becomes the bridge between reading for pleasure and "reading to learn." Brozo and Tomlinson assert that

storybooks, because of their familiar narrative style, provide background information that becomes the students' springboard to unfamiliar content.

With this in mind, our purpose is twofold. The first is to provide a model for incorporating literature into content studies through interdisciplinary literature units. The interdisciplinary approach using literature examines content over a longer period and in greater depth than traditional instructional approaches. An interdisciplinary literature curriculum transcends the cursory treatment of content concepts within academic blocks and discipline-specific learning strategies. Both interdisciplinary studies and fictional narratives by their very natures encourage students to spend more time focusing on a specific theme or concept in detail.

Our second goal is to provide examples of interdisciplinary literature units. Each example focuses on an identified storybook text using interdisciplinary content webs that include instructional activities across the disciplines.

Interdisciplinary Curriculum

An interdisciplinary curriculum consciously incorporates methods and skills from more than one discipline to teach and examine a central theme, issue, situation, or topic. Accordingly, the full range of courses from science to art are involved in providing a comprehensive learning experience for students within a specific period. The interweaving of content and skills is especially effective since no one skill is learned and used in isolation.

Acquiring knowledge contained within texts requires the reader's active involvement. Theorists contend that the reader needs to be drawn into an emotional response with written language so as to create a uniting force between reader and text (Fish, Holland, Rosenblatt). Reading fiction featuring young protagonists provides a context whereby students may identify and thus begin to understand and assimilate different world views and more complex knowledge (Hillerich, Shanahan). With fictional texts, the likelihood for content transference increases (Lynch-Brown).

Based on these principles, one way to organize an interdisciplinary unit is to select a central focus that can be developed using a narrative. For example, if "Westward Movement" is the topic under study, primary readings might include narratives such as *On to Oregon* (Morrow), *Beyond the Divide* (Lasky), *West Against the Wind* (Murrow), and *Save Queen of Sheba* (Moeri).

This use of fictional narratives as primary readings in interdisciplinary studies motivates students to become more actively involved in their learning. The familiar "story" text is more inviting because students identify more with the "voice" in a novel than with the facts of a textbook. Harste, Short, and Burke state that literature intertwines knowing and feeling, education and entertainment; it stretches the imagination to help readers see new possibilities. Thus, greater comprehension and application of information is possible through fiction.

Interdisciplinary Literature Model

For any interdisciplinary literature unit to be successful, a number of considerations must be addressed. First, teachers need to understand the primary characteristics of interdisciplinary studies. Interdisciplinary studies are actually theme studies which may have several subtopics that incorporate concepts found in each of the traditional subject areas but are not limited to them. This suggests that teachers need to look at larger-scale academic concepts, not just academic content. Second, advanced planning is essential. Planning must include selecting a theme and discerning how different content concepts and skills can be developed and integrated during the instructional timeframe. Third, the community may serve as a resource for extending the theme. Special community events such as museum exhibits, art shows, or cultural festivals can enlarge the thematic studies. Businesses and local experts can also participate, enriching instruction and the classroom environment. Fourth, schedules may need to be revised for group activities that develop as a part of the overall unit. Not every day will necessarily contain a time for all traditional instruction. For instance, science may be forfeited one day to allow time for an extensive math project, while another day may look completely traditional. Finally, since interdisciplinary literature units tend to be student directed and participatory, teachers need to recognize that the classroom environment will reflect this active learning through increased movement in the classroom, frequent library visits, and perhaps even more spontaneous laughter and verbal interaction.

Our approach in developing an interdisciplinary literature unit can be accomplished through the following five-stage process.

STAGE I: IDENTIFY STUDY THEME AND NARRATIVE TEXT

At this point, the teacher needs to select a study focus and a correlating narrative text. One strategy is to select a topic from the curriculum or from students' identified interests. It then becomes the teacher's responsibility to select a narrative text that will serve as the basis for study. In this capacity, the text extends the topic and examines the central concept in depth. For example, themes such as cultural differences, social norms, exploration, and the "New" World could be developed through the *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* (Speare).

Another strategy for organizing a thematic study is to identify the narrative text first. A teacher or student may recommend a storybook from which themes can be developed. The teacher's responsibility is then to read the text and identify the general themes and potential sub-themes. An example that we use to illustrate this text-driven curriculum is *It's Like This, Cat* (Neville). From reading this storybook, we selected an urban studies theme. Sub-themes could include the Vietnam Conflict, ethnic and multicultural aspects of large cities or America itself, the culture of the sixties and beatniks, and animals and animal rights.

STAGE II: BRAINSTORM AND CHOOSE STUDY OBJECTIVES

After reading the narrative and choosing a theme and sub-themes, the teacher brainstorms ideas for content instruction as well as interrelated concepts that can be studied using this age-appropriate literature. From these ideas generated through brainstorming, the teacher narrows the focus into attainable instructional goals.

Based on these goals, the teacher then outlines and develops the study objectives. The concepts and skills from each traditional content area are developed through the thematic literature selection and are then studied through integrated instructional strategies. For example, in *It's Like This, Cat*, a science lesson could involve the scientific concepts of decomposition and carbon dating, cell anatomy and disease, population and environmental effects to study garbage production, collection, and disposal. Other examples can be found on the literature concept web illustration [See Figure 1].

Interdisciplinary Thematic Literature Studies

URBAN STUDIES

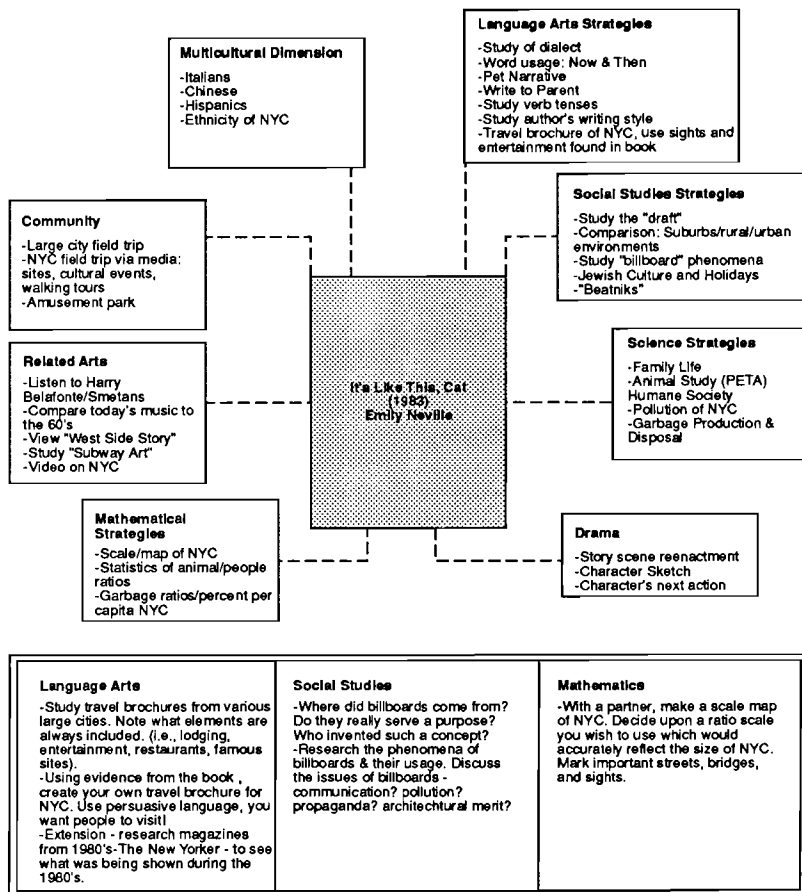


Figure 1.

Interdisciplinary Literature Web:
Urban Studies

STAGE III: DEVELOP INSTRUCTIONAL LESSONS AND ACTIVITIES

At this stage, a teacher develops lessons that incorporate all the content areas. For example, in the science component students would investigate the issue of garbage production, collection, and disposal, and in math students would graph the scientific findings. In language arts, informative or position papers could be written, and in social studies, the ethics of non-recyclable garbage production could be argued. On the urban studies web, we have highlighted some lessons in detail to illustrate individual lesson development. This stage is also the time to create a unit timeline or calendar that reflects the unit's scope and sequence. Typically, units range from three to six weeks.

STAGE IV: ESTABLISH THE EVALUATION CRITERIA

Before implementing the thematic literature unit, the teacher needs to identify unit outcomes, assessment strategies, and student evaluation methods. This will help ensure that study objectives are met, that lesson objectives correlate with evaluation outcomes, and that students are only assessed on content and material as they were developed in the thematic study. This allows for a formative evaluation of the thematic unit, so that additional learning experiences can be designed if the unit does not achieve all of the unit objectives.

It helps to remember that elements of the learning equation (students, curriculum, and teacher) interact differently depending upon interest and motivation. Since these are unknown at the time of unit implementation, teachers should be prepared to modify the unit if the learning objectives are not being met by the unit as initially designed.

STAGE V: ORGANIZE THE LOGISTICS

The final step in thematic literature unit planning is collecting and organizing the resources and materials needed for implementation. The teacher may need to arrange field trips, culminating activities, and guest speakers. The length of planning time depends upon the book chosen, the length of the unit, and the instructional activities selected and implemented. From our experience, we suggest that overall planning for the unit be completed at least two weeks before the unit begins. This provides adequate time for each stage of planning and for acquisition of materials.

Examples of Interdisciplinary literature units

This section provides examples of interdisciplinary literature units. Each thematic unit is illustrated using a web that revolves around the central theme (see Figures 2-4). Suggested concepts to be taught in each content area are listed. Our children's literature selections were chosen for several reasons. The selections examine different genres of children's literature. We also chose literature with varying publication dates with the hope that teachers may already have copies in their classrooms. We included two Newbery selections and two lesser-known storybooks to illustrate that almost any storybook can be utilized in developing a literature-based interdisciplinary curriculum.

EXAMPLE ONE

THEMES: General: Cultural Studies, Egypt specifically.

Sub-themes: intergenerational relationships, mysteries, relationships to those we do not know, stereotyping and the harm it can cause, our need for family support, the importance of friendships, being "new."

BOOK: *The Egypt Game*, Z. K. Synder

The first time Melanie Ross meets April Hall, she's not quite sure they'll have anything in common. But she soon discovers that they both share a "passion" for ancient Egypt. When they stumble upon a deserted storage yard behind an Antiques and Curio Shop, they decide it's the perfect spot for the "Egypt Game." Whenever possible after school and on weekends they meet to wear costumes, hold ceremonies, and work on their secret codes. And before long there are six Egyptians. Everyone feels it's just a game, until unusual and strange things begin to happen.

Interdisciplinary Thematic Literature Studies

CULTURAL STUDIES

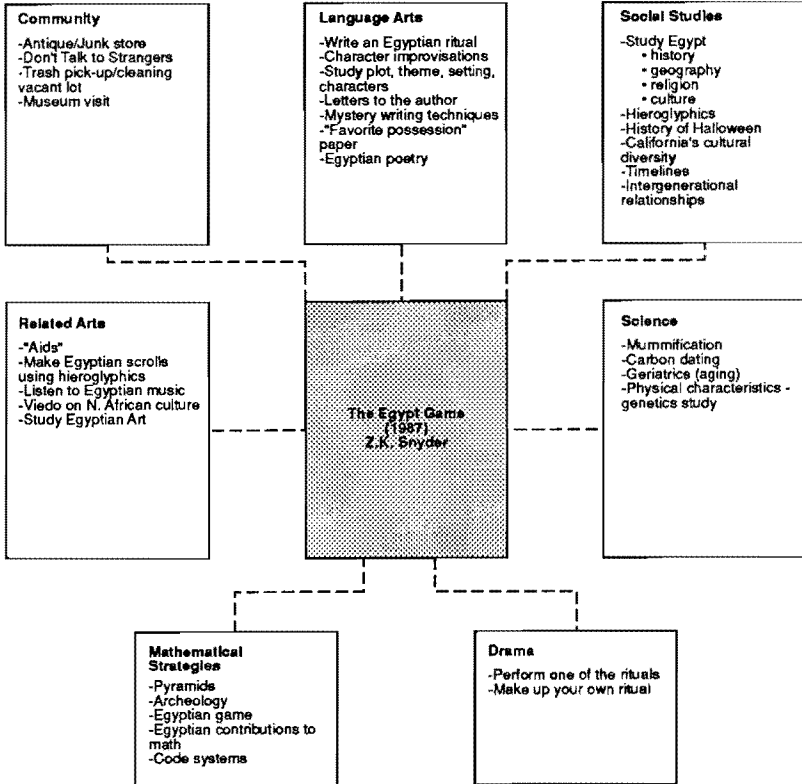


Figure 2
Cultural Studies

EXAMPLE TWO

THEMES: General: Dealing with conflict.

Sub-themes: the cycle of child abuse, learning to trust, family relationships— the positive and the negative, keeping secrets, the importance of friendships, social faces and who we really are, fight or flight syndrome, “step” families, and conflict resolution.

BOOK: *Don't Hurt Laurie*, W. D. Roberts

Laurie is part of a cycle of violence. Her mother physically and verbally abuses Laurie, but only when others are not around, particularly her new husband and his two children. Laurie has no friends because the family moves, usually at the mother's request, whenever anyone gets suspicious of Laurie's frequent “accidents.” The violence escalates until Laurie's mother finally beats her unconscious. That is when Laurie knows she must tell someone.

Interdisciplinary Thematic Literature Studies

CONFLICT

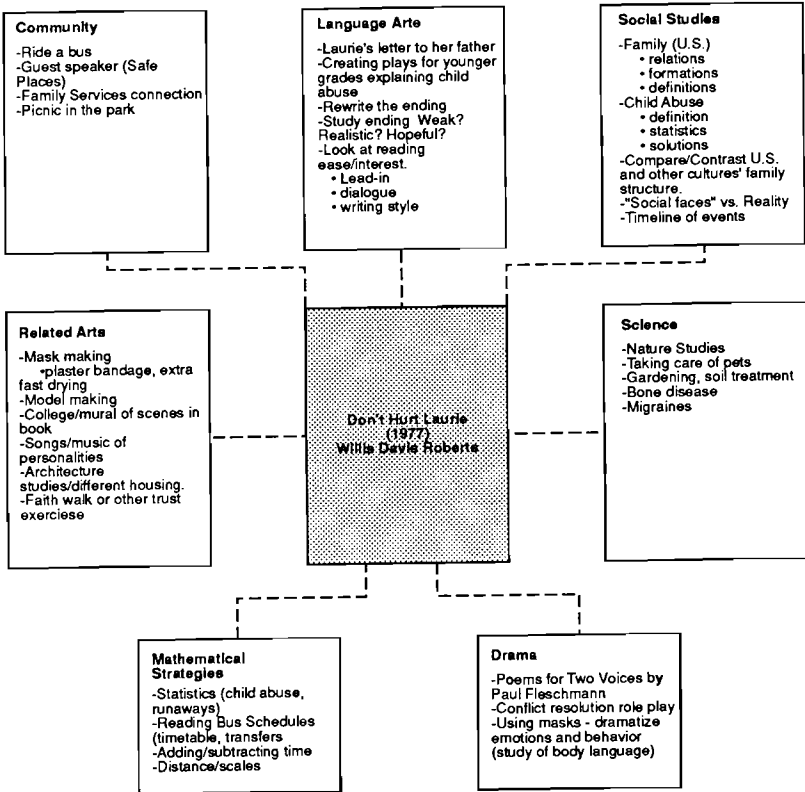


Figure 3

Conflict

EXAMPLE THREE

THEMES: General: Prejudice

Sub-themes: The Sioux Indians, the idea of family, becoming acculturated, different ways of living, relationships, love, writing to remember, sharing our cultures, pioneers and their role in American history, understanding others, and acceptance of ourselves.

BOOK: *A Circle Unbroken*, S. Hotze

In 1845, Kata Wi, a Lakota Sioux, is taken from her family by white men who say they have come to return her to her "true" family. They take her to St. Joseph, Missouri and her minister father, who tells her she must forget her "Indian" ways. Eventually, Kata Wi remembers she once was the girl, Rachel, but that was long ago and too much has happened for her to readily embrace the white world. And forgetting her Indian ways is the last thing she wants to do—for how can she forget the kindnesses of her Sioux family and the love she felt there?

Interdisciplinary Thematic Literature Studies

PREJUDICE

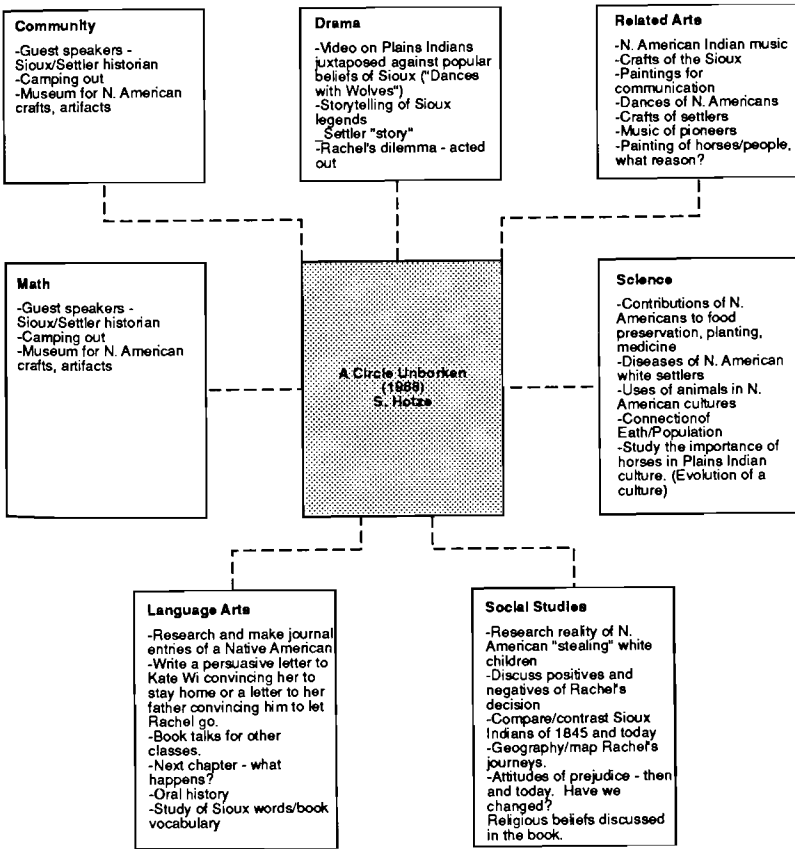


Figure 4
Prejudice

Conclusion

A key role for every teacher involves "hooking" children on lifelong learning. Reading for pleasure and reading to learn are both part of that process. A good way to accommodate both of these goals is to use children's literature in content studies. Sometimes children forget that learning is pleasurable, especially in the school environment, where the quest for knowledge may get lost in a race for the finish. It is our job and part of our pleasure as teachers to remind students that a life of learning, like the books we read, can be an adventure.

Works Cited

- Brozo, William G., and Carl M. Tomlinson. "Literature: The Key to Lively Content Courses." *The Reading Teacher* 40 (1986): 288-293.
- Fish, Stanley E. *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1967.
- Harste, Jerome C., K. Short, and C. Burke. *Creating Classrooms for Authors: The Reading-Writing Connection*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1988.
- Holland, Norman. *Five Readers Reading*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975.
- Hotze, Sollace. *A Circle Unbroken*. New York: Clarion Books, 1988.
- Jacobs, Heidi H., ed. *Interdisciplinary Curriculum: Design and Implementation*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1989.
- Kantor, R. N., T. H. Anderson, and B. B. Armbruster. "How Inconsiderate Are Children's Textbooks?" *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 15 (1983): 61-72.
- Lasky, Kathryn. *Beyond the Divide*. Columbus, OH: Macmillan, 1983.
- Moeri, Louise. *Save Queen of Sheba*. New York: Penguin Books, 1981.
- Morrow, Honore. *On to Oregon*. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1991.

- Moss, Barbara. "Children's Nonfiction Trade Books: A Complement to Content Area Text." *The Reading Teacher* 45 (1991): 26-32.
- Murrow, Liza K. *West Against The Wind*. New York: Holiday House, 1987.
- Neville, Emily C. *It's Like This, Cat*. New York: Harper-Trophy Books, 1963.
- Roberts, Willo D. *Don't Hurt Laurie*. New York: Aladdin Books, 1977.
- Rosenblatt, Louise M. *Literature as Exploration*. New York: Modern Language Association, 1976.
- Snyder, Zilpha Keatly. *The Egypt Game*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1967.

J. Lea Smith is an assistant professor in the Department of Early and Middle Childhood Education at the University of Louisville, Louisville, KY. Holly A. Johnson is a Grade 7 Language Arts teacher at South Oldham Middle School in Crestwood, KY.