

## **“New Teacher's Companion: Chapter 7. Lesson Plans and Unit Plans: The Basis for Instruction,”**

-- Gini Cunningham, ASCD, Books & Publications, 2009

### **Unit Plans: Daily Plans Linked by Concepts**

Unit plans consist of concepts and learning goals that are taught over a period of time and are woven together, often across subject areas. A unit plan lasts two or three weeks (or longer) and includes several standards, skills, and desired outcomes for interconnected learning. For example, science research involves the research, reading, and writing strands of English/language arts. So while the students are studying, researching, and writing about amphibians, they are using the skills they have learned and practiced in language arts as they expand their knowledge about science concepts. Combining subject areas most often involves overlapping lessons in the subjects, thus creating longer spans of class time for study and practice.

At the secondary level, unit plans contribute to optimal learning when teachers of different subjects work together to develop cross-curricular studies. When unit plans are done well, learning is maximized through multiple exposures to key learning concepts and goals. For example, with the topic of modern art, students study and replicate particular art pieces in art class, read about great artists in English class, and compare the history of art and historical events affecting art in social studies.

As a beginning teacher, do not think that you must spend hours and hours planning so that all lessons fall underneath the umbrella of a unit plan. Begin by knowing that each lesson is linked to the next and then to ensuing lessons. Common concepts, recurring themes, and similar desired outcomes, along with instructional materials that blend diverse subject areas, plus a big vision of student learning, overlap to create a unit plan. Many of your teaching colleagues are likely to have unit plans they have already developed and used and are willing to share. Take advantage of this free material and then adjust it for successful implementation with your students.

### **Elements of a Unit Plan**

A unit plan overarches all daily lesson plans with connections among key topics, concepts, skills, and desired outcomes. All the following elements should be considered when developing a unit plan:

- A principal purpose
- Main topic or topics (e.g., World War II, reptiles, double-digit multiplication)
- Concepts (e.g., integrity, the Doppler effect) that unite lessons within the unit
- Essential skills to be developed
- Academic goals and desired outcomes
- Academic standards that directly relate to the subject area or areas
- Cross-curricular connections
- Methods to make the learning relevant throughout the unit
- Big ideas that link to additional big ideas to increase understanding
- Past learning that links to present learning and leads to future learning

- An understanding of students' current knowledge
- Questions to guide thinking each day and from day to day
- Questions based on recurring unit ideas or themes
- Clear expectations for learning of all students
- Vocabulary to study and focus on, with multiple exposures over time to engrain learning
- A determination of appropriate level of proficiency to meet desired outcomes
- Assessments for before, during, and after lessons and the overall unit

### **Begin with an Outline**

To begin planning a unit, first outline the academic goals of the big vision of the unit. This phase includes deciding what students should know and be able to do at the end of the unit, the number of days or weeks required to maximize learning (great units always require slightly more time than expected), and selecting textbook chapters and stories and other materials to incorporate.

Next divide everything into the available class periods or time slots to determine how to fit the pieces into the unit. Build in extra time for review and enrichment to ensure that all students have learned the material. With each lesson, pinpoint the specific goals and desired outcomes that are to be met to ensure your students will meet the learning goals of the overall unit. Document shortcomings and successes for future lessons.

When you know where you are going, you have a far better chance of arriving at your destination. Planning your unit road map for learning is an excellent way to stretch your thinking and implement the big vision. Having a clear goal and deciding what routes best allow you to reach your destination increase the likelihood of success. The stops along the way for refueling and refreshing are the strategies and assessments that enhance the trip and the total learning experience.

### **Overarching Questions for Unit Planning**

As you plan each unit, ask these overarching questions:

- What is the big vision for the unit?
- What is the primary educational intent for this unit?
- What do students know right now?
- What should students know and be able to do by the end of each lesson?
- What should students know and be able to do by the end of the unit?
- How can instruction be adjusted to meet the needs of all students?
- What will take place before and during the unit to make sure that all students are successful?
- What assessments (see Chapter 10) will best ensure that all students have reached the desired outcomes? These should include the following:
  - Pre-assessments
  - Mini-assessments
  - Post-assessments
  - Monitoring and adjusting throughout the unit
- What happens when students do not know?

- What materials are available for enrichment activities?
- What are the cross-curricular connections?
- Is the time for the unit well justified?

The purpose of a unit is to unite lesson plans to enhance learning. The unit plan is not a place to throw together every imaginable teaching idea in total disarray. I have witnessed magnificent castles created from units that had nothing to do with academic standards or what students needed to know and be able to do. The students had fun as they built models and colored pictures, but the deep learning was not present. On the other hand, units that are artfully crafted provide tremendous learning opportunities for students.

Unit plans demand great amounts of time, energy, and planning, but the results are incredible because each step of the learning ties to the next. The planning outline in Figure 7.4 is useful for completing the specifics of a unit.

### **Figure 7.4. Unit Outline**

Purpose of the unit:

Unit title:

Key concepts:

Subject area(s):

Desired outcomes:

Overarching goals, big ideas:

Overarching standards to be studied:

Sectional standards:

Daily standards:

Daily big ideas:

Sectional goals:

Daily goals:

Overarching questions (that reflect and highlight the big ideas):

Sectional questions:

Daily questions:

Assessment types to be used:

- Informal:
- Formal:

Methods to monitor and adjust instruction during lesson:

Methods to determine background knowledge:

Key vocabulary:

- Tier 1: Necessary for student success; students should already know or be familiar with these; fairly easy to teach
- Tier 2: Necessary for student success; primarily new terms or the development of deeper understanding of the terms
- Tier 3: Difficult, problematic terms; specific to domain

Materials needed:

Time allotment per day:

Number of days required to complete the unit:

Desired outcomes based on previous lessons and student progress:

Daily plan for lesson phases (include as many days as necessary):

Day 1:

Day 2:

Day 3:

Methods for connecting all learning:

Next steps:

### **Unit Plans, Time Slots, and Grading Periods**

An important factor to consider in planning is where lessons and units fall in the grading period. Sometimes long units create problems when the "big grade" lands in the next grading period. If the culminating project is due at the beginning of the new nine-week period and it has a weighted grade, that one big grade might distort the true picture of student learning. A high mark may indicate to some students that the rest of the learning for the new nine-week period is of no significance—the kind of attitude expressed by comments such as "I already have an *A*." A low mark may be followed by "I didn't finish my project, so it is useless to try to improve my grade." Plan the unit with these excuses in mind to alleviate potential problems.

### **Unit Essentials and Considerations**

As you plan and teach the unit, constantly ask, "Can I prove that students have learned? What will I do for those who know and those who do not know?" These questions and reflective responses ensure that all students will understand and achieve. If done well, unit plans combine lessons in a way that can lead to extraordinary student knowledge and understanding. It is an inspirational sight when students light up with "aha!" moments through multiple encounters and practice with concepts and skills that infuse their learning.

Cross-curricular unit plans offer the opportunity to work with respected colleagues to increase insight, add new perspective, and augment instructional knowledge. This teamwork expands your own expertise while also demonstrating your special skills to others. However, not all colleagues will exert the same effort for each unit. Avoid making big unit plans with those who do not willingly complete their part of the planning and instruction or who do not appreciate your enthusiasm.

When I was teaching 8th grade English, we read *Night*, the autobiography of Elie Wiesel. The book details the author's survival in a concentration camp during the Nazi terror of World War II. I taught this unit for 11 years, and each repetition and reading made the book more powerful to me as lessons were enriched through student feedback. I scheduled the unit during the time that my students were studying World War II in history class, creating a learning liaison between the two subjects.

Each year my students talked more and more about the unit, comparing facts and

information from their history teacher and textbook to what we were learning from the autobiography and our discussions. The effect of this unit expanded greatly when the history teacher, Herk Criswell, and I began more detailed planning of our units together. The students did not just double their knowledge between our two classes, lectures, notes, and discussions. I would say they tripled or quadrupled their knowledge. It was amazing to see the enthusiasm they gained for learning through our collaboration.

A bonus was how students compared the historical information each teacher shared. As we would read and discuss, some would say, "Yeah, that is exactly what Mr. Criswell said in history." On other occasions, students would double-check our facts: "Mr. Criswell told us ... But you said ..." This interchange led to interesting dialogue about perceptions of what students had heard in one class or the other and how history is interpreted by readers, writers, textbook companies, teachers, and students. It also allowed students to compare the style and tone of two literary genres: autobiography and textbook.

Sometimes my students would comment, "Hey, did you know we are learning about this in history?" and I would nod, to which they would respond, "Why don't more teachers do that? It really makes things make sense when you hear about them more than once." Although the unit was always complicated and demanding to teach, the student learning and thinking were extraordinary and empowered both teachers and students.

### **Being Aware of What Students Already Know**

Whether you are working on daily plans or a large unit, always consider your learners. Understanding their background knowledge and previous learning prevents needless repetition or insufficient explanation. Students bring a wide variety of background knowledge with them to every class and subject, and part of teaching is determining the extent of that knowledge.

Experience with students shows that one of the best frames for initial instruction in a unit is the KWL (Ogle, 1989), which asks the following: What do students (1) know, (2) want to know, and (3) learn as a result of the unit? At the beginning of the unit, students complete the *Know* section of the KWL. The teacher now has background knowledge about past learning and can also identify any misconceptions. Next the students complete the *Want to know* section so that the teacher can interweave bits of information that have piqued curiosity into the contents of the unit. At the end, students complete the *Learned* section to provide feedback about their understanding, which the teacher can then use for planning next steps.

Every step you take to set students up for success in learning pays high dividends. One of these is the bright smiles of achievement on student faces as they "get it." Another is the deep personal satisfaction gleaned from doing a job well. Few rewards are greater than positively affecting the lives and learning of children.

### **Closing Advice**

Teaching is a conglomeration of best teaching practices, intricate lesson and unit plans, and the expertise of the teacher guiding students to learning. It is exhausting and exhilarating.

Those who remain in the profession over time develop a tremendous knowledge and understanding of children, their perceptions, and how young minds work. Although you may not make the multimillion-dollar salary of a sports celebrity, a movie star, or a CEO, your reward for teaching will be worth far more.

On the most troubling days, when frustration and worry levels appear to be at their highest, remember that there is nothing more exciting than observing students when the "Aha! I get it" light pops on. You may never know the difference you made in the lives of students, but teachers always leave a mark. Great lessons and well-planned units increase knowledge and leave imprints of competence and understanding.

Teaching and learning are a never-ending cycle. Although all of the work may wear you out, when students' minds shine, you will be refreshed and ready for the next challenge.

(<http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/109051/chapters/Lesson-Plans-and-Unit-Plans@-The-Basis-for-Instruction.aspx>)