

CHAPTER 14  
**USING THEME CYCLES**  
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**SUMMARY**

**PATHWAYS TO THEME CYCLES**

## PATHWAYS TO PONDER

- What are the advantages in seeing knowledge from different fields or disciplines as related?
- How do thematic approaches make learning of skills more accessible?
- What roles does the teacher have in making Theme Cycles effective?
- What different styles are possible for thematic approaches?

## THE VALUE OF THEMATIC APPROACHES FOR REAL LEARNING

In classrooms around the world, we find students engaged with Thematic Studies. Students usually enjoy the kind of learning that takes place in these ways of working, and meaning-centered teachers believe that Thematic Studies are extremely effective both for integrating the curriculum and for teaching skills in context. In this chapter we examine the concept of thematic teaching and its artifacts.

To begin with, let us clarify the terminology in use. In our work in Australia and New Zealand, we have happily used the label *Thematic Units* to refer to any approach that integrated learning across the curriculum with some organizing connection that gave a sense of unity to the study. American writers have tended in recent times to distinguish between *Literature-based Units*, where one or more books is the integrating device and *Theme Cycles* where the emphasis is on

the integration of Language Arts and learning in social studies, science, math, and other curricular areas. Theme Cycles may take up most of the program with students learning across the curriculum, researching and developing ways to demonstrate what they have learned. We will use the term *Theme Cycles* in this chapter, but will argue that there is an issue with the way the word is often used that we want to avoid. That is the tendency to associate doing Theme Cycles with completing projects, where the implication is that the written product is the outcome rather than just part of what the learning has been. In addition, we will not separate out Literature-based Units from Theme Cycles, though in some classrooms they may look quite different.

Teachers use many different approaches to thematic learning, but all forms of thematic approach have in common an emphasis on making connections in knowledge. When we learn, we connect new information with what we already know, tying it in with our existing knowledge structures or attaching it to concepts we control.

Any time that we focus on very narrow aspects of knowledge, it is difficult for us to do more than make our own particular connections. But when we look at wider and more complex representations of meaning, we can see more of the variety of ways in which people make sense of the world. Wurman (2000) has demonstrated how easily people become anxious about the overload of having too much information to deal with. He shows that if we understand the ways in which things are connected to our uses, it is easier for us to organize and to understand what they are and what they do. Teachers may choose to use thematic approaches because they facilitate learning. Dalton and Boyd (1992) explore ways in which teachers can make choices about leadership in the classroom.

Instead of choosing to feel overwhelmed by the knowledge explosion, the pressure of external forces and 'more and more to teach', they are choosing to move to an economy of learning -- learning and teaching that is more economical because it is centered on principles that underpin the way they operate as teaching professionals. Unlike packaged programs, models and activity books, such principles offer guidelines against which to measure the worth of external resources. They provide a holistic or 'big' picture for us all to work towards in terms of leadership, learning and human growth, relationship with self and others, individuality, interdependence and harmony. (Dalton and Boyd, 1992, p 3.)

One of the ways of putting those principles into effect is by using Theme Cycles. Theme Cycles are studies that begin with the recognition that there are many aspects of knowledge that are strongly related to each other. In practice they often involve making some specific connections amongst various aspects of the world we live in. They may, for example:

- connect different books by the same author;
- connect books by different authors on similar topics;
- connect different animals by looking at their shared common environment;
- connect a range of different kinds of information about a particular topic;
- connect different ways of looking at the same kinds of information;
- compare different parts of the world
- explore different stages or the sequence of processes.

Whatever the nature of a Theme Cycle, it will enable students to make significant connections amongst things, people or events that enhance their real knowledge about the world and themselves. Much of what takes place in education at all levels, and particularly in schools, has been – with good intentions - cut up into what seems like manageable pieces to be presented to students. Unfortunately, in the process, it has lost some of its connections with the real world. Subject boundaries are often imposed artificially to make information easier to handle; the pieces may seem to be more easily sorted out and identified. But the result can be like a jigsaw puzzle where the little pieces may actually be harder to place because they are not seen in relation to other pieces and they go nowhere until they can be connected to other pieces. Students may identify the pieces, but not get the big picture. Thematic approaches start by making connections, and they provide experiences that are broad and rich enough in detail to enable students to connect their learning with real life.

In real life, what is learned in one situation will apply to other situations, and knowledge gained in a particular discipline is relevant to other disciplines. It often makes more sense to see relationships among different aspects of the real world than to regard them as discrete entities, even though it may be convenient to treat them separately at times. A simple example is that isolating the sounds of letters is an artificial notion, which gives an unrealistic message to students. Letter-sound relationships are important for reading, but they are learned more effectively when they are looked at in the context of known words and in continuous text (Clay, 1991). Similarly, many forms of graphs are useful in depicting information, but they should be learned as students have a need to display data. To take a more complex example, a logbook is a kind of journal, which systematically records required observations. It would be possible, but

rather pointless, to teach students what a logbook was without putting them in the position of needing to use one. They could be taught the differences between the self-selected thoughts and observations of a journal or diary, and the structured, consistent observations of a logbook. They could even undergo simulated experiences where they pretended to be a ship's captain, for example. But if the genre of logbooks is to make practical sense to students it should be learned, supported by whatever specific teaching is necessary, in the context of a real need - an instance of how logbooks are actually used in our culture. An illustration of this is given in the sample planning unit on "Chickens Aren't the Only Ones" later in this chapter. Observations of chicks in the classroom should be recorded in systematic ways. Then students would readily learn how logbooks work because compiling them would have a real purpose, providing an opportunity to compare the data gathered by the students with that displayed in resource books, and opening up explorations of ways of depicting the records of observations. This indicates something of the advantage that thematic approaches have in associating interesting information across the curriculum and in providing a means to learn both subject matter and language skills.

## **DIFFERENT STYLES OF THEME CYCLES**

The word "theme" has several related meanings. At least three of them are significant in understanding the idea of Theme Cycles. A theme can be a repeated visual or auditory effect in art and music, an element that is common to several parts of a painting or a piece of music around which other elements are arranged. Themes are also organizing or orienting principles that shape ideas, or discourses in a culture. And this meaning of theme can be extended to denote the topic of discourse - what we talk or write about. In the past, the term "theme" has been used to name a topic assigned by the teacher for students to write about, but this usage is not

what we mean when we discuss Theme Cycles. Our focus is on those meanings, which help teachers and students to bring together a variety of experiences around a common organizing principle.

Theme Cycles always make connections among experiences, but their scope varies greatly. At one extreme, a Theme Cycle might simply be a single class session, which ties together students' experiences with two different books, such as a traditional and a contemporary version of a fairy tale. At the other extreme, a Theme Cycle might provide a vast range of options which centered around an organizing idea such as "Change" which could keep a class occupied gainfully for a whole year.

Theme Cycles can be whole class activities where the teacher leads activities that all the students undertake together, or in which more than one class - even a whole school - participates. Units can be conducted as group activities, which are later combined so that the rest of the class learns from the group, which has done each study. Another way of developing Theme Cycles is to initiate individual projects with related topics (Ward, 1988) so that the class builds up a great deal of information which can be shared. This approach benefits from teacher modeling. For example, the teacher could model how to do a biographical mini-project about a notable inventor, gathering information with the students, identifying the key elements of a report, and demonstrating ways of presenting the information. Students could then independently construct projects on other famous inventors either closely following the structure of the model project, or diverging from that, depending on their own stage of development in such work. As will be obvious from these few examples, there is not a single right way to conduct Theme Cycles.

One of the challenges for teachers to face in adopting a thematic approach is that such ways of working often are better suited to student-centered learning than to direct instruction, or skill and drill approaches. However, when teachers move to using student inquiry as a means of learning, they often seem to act as if the students were meant to learn on their own. Teaching in Theme Cycles still has a strong role for teachers. They need to create appropriate contexts for learning to take place in, make the activities as relevant to the real world as possible, and interact supportively with students. Theme Cycles should provide learning challenges to students with teachers working on enabling strategies that provide the right kind of instruction to facilitate students' engagement with worthwhile learning tasks. It should be clear that undertaking a Theme Cycle is not just a matter of doing a set of worksheets on the same topic. Instead, Theme Cycles should be developing students as "experts" in a field of real learning, developing ways of thinking about subject matter or content the way that professionals in that field would think. Teachers may find that they develop new skills themselves when engaged in such explorations, because often the most effective way for them to work is to take on the mantle of a professional in the relevant field themselves.

## **SOURCES FOR PLANNING THEME CYCLES**

### **WHERE DO IDEAS FOR UNITS COME FROM ?**

Where do ideas for units come from? There are several different ways in which planning for Theme Cycles may begin.

- Curriculum requirements. The starting point for a plan may be skills or content that the teacher is required to teach by the education authority. The teacher may begin by identifying a skill that must be taught and practiced and then seek to find content that

provides opportunities to work on the skill. Alternatively, it may be coverage of the content which is required and the teacher may then focus on identifying the language abilities which will be taught and practiced within the unit.

- The interests of the teacher or students that may emerge from other learning for individuals, a group or the class. Often an interesting aspect of some other study may trigger a fascination in the teacher or one or more of the students that leads to a thematic study for the class or a group or individual project.
- The stimulus of a direct experience. A particular experience, individual or shared, planned by the teacher or occurring incidentally, may trigger a desire to continue study of related topics. Excursions often provide an organizing focus for a Theme Cycle
- The stimulus of a book or other vicarious experience. Perhaps the teacher reads a book to the class and the story, or the information, or some idea in it arouses such interest that the class or one or more individuals extend their engagement with the ideas into a Theme Cycle. Web investigations often start from a snippet of information that someone in the class finds on the Internet.
- Seeing a unit that another teacher has found to be successful. Theme Cycles can be versatile so that an effective unit at another grade level or in another school can be adapted to a new situation.
- Events of local or national importance. These may provide excellent opportunities to explore ideas across the curriculum. However, it is suggested that teachers should avoid over-emphasis on Theme Cycles on holidays and festivals, etc. These can be stimulating and interesting, but they often assume an unrealistic importance in the curriculum and take up a great deal of time without contributing much to students' knowledge.

## A MODEL OR FRAMEWORK FOR PLANNING THEME CYCLES

The most important idea in planning Theme Cycles is the realization that the unit should advance students' knowledge of both subject matter or content, and of language and work skills. Each Theme Cycle undertaken in the classroom automatically fits in some way into a sequence of activities or units. Teachers may plan with an emphasis on the content that they want the class to work with, or an emphasis on the skills that they want them to develop, but in an integrated or Theme Cycle both strands will always be involved. If it is the first unit of the school year, then it will set the tone for much of what will happen in the class for some time to come. The initial Theme Cycle provides an orientation to a productive mode of learning. This is a time to establish work habits, to identify the strengths of the class that the teacher will build on in later units and to begin identifying areas of student performance which may need specific attention. This attention to ways of working is not confined to the opening unit but will be maintained throughout the year. However, it is only one side of the value of Theme Cycles for learning. The other side is the information which students learn to handle. Notice that this is not just a matter of learning information itself, but becoming adept at gathering, selecting, transforming, recording and reporting information.

Teachers using thematic approaches have objectives which address the processes of *how* students learn, and other objectives which address the content of *what* students learn. Both kinds of outcomes are important and should be planned for. But because Theme Cycles allow students to explore so many ideas in such a variety of ways, it must be expected that there will be outcomes that are important and useful but different from and beyond those which were actually

intended and planned. This open-endedness of outcomes means that the planning itself must be open-ended. Teachers who use Theme Cycles effectively DO plan carefully, but they know that they must add to and adjust their plans as the unit progresses. They will also find that some of the planned worthwhile activities no longer fit within the available time and need to be deleted from the plan. When students and teachers become jointly engaged in developing ideas in Theme Cycles, the teachers' expectations of what students can do, or what they are ready to learn, tend to be overtaken by the reality of students' accomplishments. An information base for learning provides a launching pad that enables learning to take off and travel far beyond what students are likely to achieve when they are not engaged with real ideas but are simply focusing on language skills. But this learning progress is not just learning of content. When students have real purposes for reading, listening, talking and writing, they develop their language skills to fulfil their need to understand and to communicate. And when they need more information about how to accomplish some task that they really want to complete, they are more easily taught the necessary skills in focused learning episodes or mini-lessons.

As students learn subject matter and language skills to accomplish language tasks, they need to be provided with opportunities to demonstrate their mastery and control. These opportunities to perform have traditionally been over-powered by the notion of testing. A more productive view would be to see them as a time to display learning, by pulling together what the students have learned and to transform it or represent it in some way that involves more than just repeating what has been covered in the program.

There are several aspects of learning discussed in the preceding paragraphs that can be identified as stages in the sequencing of activities within Theme Cycles.

**INITIATING ACTIVITIES**

The first stage of a unit is made up of Initiating Activities that provide an introduction connecting to earlier units or experiences but having as its main purpose to orient the students to the new theme or topic. This stage focuses on one or more significant ideas and experiences that will frame the unit of study. It involves the use of one or more stimulus events to open up the study, to give the teacher and students an opportunity to shape the unit and to negotiate the kinds of activities which will take place within the theme. Teachers vary in their willingness and readiness to allow students to play a major role in developing the curriculum. For many teachers it is more appropriate that they take the major role in planning themselves, and allow limited scope for the students to design or select activities. But there is a growing number of teachers, especially those who work with middle and upper grades, who feel comfortable giving students a considerable say in how they will engage in the study of a topic and in choosing the actual topic to study. Wherever you fit on this continuum of teachers, you should recognize that students learn more effectively when they are able to assume a degree of responsibility for their own learning. The Initiating Activity should give them an enthusiasm for the thematic topic and a belief that it has many interesting possibilities for learning.

A good way of thinking about some aspects of the beginning of a unit, is to call it “The WOW stage”. That means that the teacher is encouraging the students to be amazed and excited about some of the things that they are finding out. The stimulus of well-made video programs or other resources may capture the students’ imaginations and enthusiasm. It helps to gather up a lot of resources that students can start to survey so that they are developing a sense of how much interesting information is available. Many students enjoy browsing the web seeking relevant sites and accessing material that will be helpful for more in-depth study later on. Given that many

students are not easily fired up about learning, a lot depends on the teacher's own enthusiasm in getting started. Needless to say, a teacher about to start doing the same unit in the same way that he or she has done it for many years would be well advised to find a different topic, new resources and new ways of looking at learning.

Evaluation of the program and assessment of the students' learning begins in this stage. Teachers should make observations of student attitudes, for example, and in some units at least there will be samples of work that can be gathered for comparison with later efforts. Students should be helped to understand that assessment that demonstrates that they do not know something is helpful both to themselves and to the teacher in identifying what needs to be learned during the unit.

### **ENHANCING ACTIVITIES**

The second stage of the unit constitutes the major portion of the study. Planning for this stage involves identifying worthwhile activities that will extend students' knowledge of the content and their control over language functions. This stage may be called the Enhancing Activities. Most of the learning within the unit will take place in this stage. The Enhancing Activities fulfill two functions that might be viewed as either parallel or intertwined. The modes of language - listening, speaking, reading and writing - are the vehicles for most learning to take place. Language Arts teaching has as its purpose to enhance the ability of students to use language for a wide range of purposes in a wide range of situations. But these language abilities are learned most effectively when we use language for real purposes in real situations. Teaching language skills is done in the context of using language to get things done. Teachers can vary the

focus of their attention from the message in a written or spoken communication to the form or structure of the language used, or to some particular element of the language. This change of focus needs to be made at times when the teacher believes that more information about how language is used to fulfill particular tasks will:

- a) enhance students' performance of those language tasks; and
- b) improve their ability to apply what they learn to new language settings; and
- c) improve their ability to use the same function with other subject matter.

Thus, at some times during the Enhancing Activities of a Theme Cycle the teacher's focus is on language skills. Nevertheless, the major importance will be attached to the subject matter, content, or message of the material being studied. If students are going to enjoy thematic approaches and get most benefit from them, it must be clear to them that the unit is not just a thinly-disguised excuse to teach them skills. Students can and often do get excited about learning skills, particularly those that give them access to new information, like web searching skills. But they want “to know stuff” and that has to be a central concern of Theme Cycles.

Evaluation of the program is essential to ensure that this stage is developing children's understanding and skills, because if it is not doing so the program needs to be adjusted. Part of the evaluation process may involve assessment of students' performance, but the emphasis should be on evaluation that is formative rather than summative. Assessing how well the students have learned what has been negotiated and what else they have achieved, is an on-going process and depends on careful observation at all stages of the unit.

## **SYNTHESIZING ACTIVITIES**

The third and final stage of the Theme Cycle can be called the Synthesizing Activities. In many ways this is the most significant part of the evaluation and assessment of the unit, but it should serve more to provide opportunities for students to bring together what they have learned and to display aspects of their learning outcomes. In many instances, this stage should encourage transformation of the material learned so that it is clear that the student has internalized it and is not just reproducing it. The Synthesizing Activities constitute more than a test situation and more than a single culminating activity, although both of these may be part of their nature. Where possible, the Synthesizing Activities should provide students with opportunities to talk, write and use other forms of display for an audience which goes beyond the teacher and the rest of the class. Parents need to have some involvement in all stages of Theme Cycles, but the Synthesizing Activities should give them a chance to celebrate learning with their children.

Theme Cycles do not necessarily proceed as tidily as plans or descriptions imply. A Theme Cycle may not separate clearly into three stages, but planning within this framework makes it easier for the teacher to visualize progress. The terms used in this framework are similar to those used by the Queensland (Australia) English Syllabus (1994) which calls the first phase “Orientating Activities”. Other formats for planning units use different terms. For example, Allen, Sampson and Teale (1989) use the terms Focusing, Developing and Continuing to indicate three stages in each activity within a unit. Whether dealing with activities within units, or the whole of a Theme Cycle, it is important to be responsive to the students' interest in the part of the study taking place and to extend, adjust or cut off the activity to get maximum benefit from it. Where it is feasible, the students will make decisions for themselves about their progress through a unit. Teachers who want their students to develop independence, give them options for decision-making within the overall plan of the unit.

## **SOME PRINCIPLES FOR PLANNING UNITS**

### **DON'T FORCE COVERAGE OF THE CURRICULUM**

Teachers planning Theme Cycles should avoid artificially forcing the unit to cover every area of the curriculum. Some units may naturally have a strong Science emphasis, while others do not. In some cases, it is easy to find useful applications of mathematics activities, but at other times the connection may require more squeezing into shape than is appropriate just to write math problems on the thematic topic, for example. If the math concepts are not being used for genuine math purposes, they should be left out and dealt with separately during the unit. There are many other ways to integrate math as shown in Griffiths and Clyne (1993). Teachers who can not find good quality poetry that fits the theme, would find it better to use none (or to write their own!) in the unit. Good poetry can be used for other purposes alongside rather than within the theme.

Theme Cycles will vary in the emphasis they place on different aspects of the curriculum. One may emphasize Social Studies /Art /Health, for example, while another may emphasize Science/Math/ Music, but all will be undergirded by Language Arts.

### **PROVIDE BALANCE WITHIN OR BETWEEN UNITS**

Among the elements that should be balanced in the curriculum are: input and self-expression; fact and fiction; imagination and information; use of computer-based data sources and book or other print sources; simple and complex ideas; historical and contemporary settings; distant and local issues. Balance does not require an equal amount of each of these. The teacher needs to be sensitive to what has already been covered and to how the students are coping with

particular activities. The program should not over-emphasize input, for example, without giving the students a chance to express their own thoughts, but neither should it expect them to express opinions without being exposed to ideas that will help them form opinions. Balance is also achieved from one unit to another and not necessarily within a unit. Thus, a particular Theme Cycle may heavily emphasize fictional material, but subsequent units may balance this by a stronger emphasis on factual material. Some units may place a heavy emphasis on developing students' writing of expository text while other units explore a variety of ways of presenting reports.

### **USE THE PLAN AS A GUIDE ONLY**

It is common for Theme Cycle plans to contain more activities than are required in the program or than can be fitted in to the time available, even when it is the teacher's own plan based on first-hand knowledge of the students. Students' abilities are not static over time and their interests also change, so the implementation of the plan must take account of this. The plan should be used as a guide - almost like a menu to choose from. The plan can only be an approximation. If a teacher follows a plan to the last letter of detail, it suggests that the plan has been implemented without an appropriate level of careful observation of the students' learning and development over the duration of the unit.

### **IDENTIFY THE CRUCIAL ASPECTS OF THE UNIT**

It may be helpful to identify during the planning phases, the key elements among the activities. These may be activities that practice requirements of your education system, such as Essential Elements or Common Curriculum Elements. Identifying these in advance may be of assistance in selecting which aspects of the plan must be retained as the plan is adapted. Other

aspects of the plan may be optional - activities which are worthwhile, but which may be replaced by others that emerge from students' interests, from additional information, or from resources that the students bring from home.

### **DO WHAT COMES NATURALLY**

There is no one right way to plan and implement a Theme Cycle. Teachers think and work differently, so their units will take different shapes. But individual teachers will also take different pathways to planning their own units depending on such factors as the initiating idea, their familiarity with the topic and resources, and the students' knowledge and perceived learning needs. All of these factors interplay with the personality and creativity of the teacher. Plans should appeal to the students and the teacher. If a topic does not seem worth spending a good deal of quality time with, it would be better to plan a few quick activities to teach the main points, or to provide resources for a different approach. Theme Cycles should be joyful and interesting experiences. What can become natural for teachers is to realize how much the students are learning and how much they are enjoying following the scent of ideas that they are encountering in open-ended explorations.

### **VARY THE TIME ALLOCATION FOR WORKING ON THEME CYCLES**

As has already been indicated, the length of Theme Cycles should vary. It is also advisable to vary the amount of time allocated within the timetable on different days within the conduct of a particular unit. Because this kind of work brings so many aspects of language and learning together, it benefits from having blocks of time rather than single short sessions in the daily program. Because school situations vary so much, it is not possible to recommend a

particular way of working. Teachers should note that sometimes the amount of time allowed is too great and makes difficulties for students who do not prioritize their own use of time well, and sometimes it is too short to allow students' interests to develop fully. Once again, a balance must be provided, and if possible, allowance made for some students to continue on individual studies while others have switched to working with the teacher. Some units start from a single event like the reading of a book and gradually develop as students' interests are extended. In other cases, a whole day might be devoted to a high-impact set of experiences that launch the unit with a bang.

## **LIMITING THE UNIT**

Some Theme Cycles can seem so rich in worthwhile activities that they could continue for a whole year.

Extended thematic studies have exciting possibilities, but put a very heavy demand on the teacher's ability to monitor and support such a complexity of learning. Most teachers employing a thematic approach to teaching and learning would find it more effective and more convenient to run a range of themes in a school year.

Teachers need to be careful observers of children's learning behaviors, the outcomes of their work, the level of engagement with tasks within the theme and the quality of interaction within groups, to ensure that what are intended as worthwhile activities keep being worthwhile. Some types of units can keep students happy and busy, yet not really contribute significantly to their learning. Students may become very successful at giving teachers what they want, but not be learning new things. Some students get lost on the Internet, finding vast quantities of relevant, or slightly relevant material, but not really processing and understanding it. At times, such students can go on and on without any valuable learning. Theme Cycles are opportunities to expand students' worlds, their knowledge and skills, and to affect their attitudes in positive ways

but teachers need to guard against letting themes drag on too long. The level of interaction and challenge and the quality of outcomes must be considered in deciding how long to continue, but even when these are all satisfactory, it may be better to curtail a study so that new challenges and new ideas are faced. In the sample unit "Chickens Aren't the Only Ones" in this chapter, it would be easy to extend the study onto dinosaurs, which would certainly be popular with many students, but to do so would distract attention from the main issues of the unit. Theme Cycles which capture the students' interest and enthusiasm can provide the stimulus for further "at home work" which can continue for some students on their own initiative after the unit at school has moved on to another theme.

## **THEME CYCLE TEACHING AS ACTION-RESEARCH**

Action Research is taking place when a researcher:

1. identifies a problem or issue to investigate,
2. plans an action which may overcome the problem,
3. puts the plan into effect,
4. observes the effects of the action
5. modifies the action plan to improve it based on what is observed about its effects,
6. continues the cycle.

Action Research is ideally suited to teachers as researchers in their own classrooms. In an important sense, all teachers should be Action Researchers all the time, because effective teaching requires a sense of direction, good planning, monitoring of learning and of how the planned activities are working out in practice, and an ability to improve teaching and learning by studying the effects of activities on students' learning. Teaching needs to be accompanied by sensitive observation - to be evaluative - so that it determines the value to students' learning of

the activities and tasks that are undertaken. Teachers who see themselves as Action Researchers will bring an open-minded attitude to their use of Theme Cycles which will be productive in improving both planning and monitoring of learning.

Commercially-produced Theme Cycles may provide a useful starting point for some teachers, particularly those who are not experienced in planning to integrate different activities across the curriculum. But whether the unit is prepared by the teacher who uses it or by someone else, there is a danger of teachers developing expectations of how a Theme Cycle should proceed and how the students should progress with it. These expectations may appear to be "set in concrete" with all aspects of scope, sequence and implementation following already established pathways. Some teachers might implement the same Theme Cycles in the same way year after year, especially if the previous class enjoyed them. Almost inevitably, this would lead to students' learning outcomes being limited. On the other hand, those who teach evaluatively, who observe students carefully (who "kid watch", Goodman, 1985), and reflect upon students' responses, contributions to discussions, control of written and spoken genres, and their level of interest, will adjust activities and expectations accordingly. The same thematic topic implemented in successive years by such a teacher would most likely vary considerably in development and outcomes because of the nature of the students themselves. In addition, a learning teacher is likely to have new ideas and new resources to try whether the unit is the same or different.

## **THEME CYCLES AND PARENT PARTICIPATION**

Parent participation in students' learning programs can be a significant factor, not just in the success of the learning, but also in the relationship of home and school. Support from home can provide useful resources of information and experience. When teachers use project work as

an important part of their program, especially when the projects are individual and carried out at home as well as at school, there are real difficulties in establishing just what should be the role of parents in supporting their children's learning (Ward, 1988). Theme Cycles can use parental support in a variety of ways if teachers help parents to understand what they are trying to do and why they would value parent participation.

This requires more than just keeping parents informed about what the Theme Cycle topics will be. Most parents have experienced the following scenario, or one much like it.

"Hi, dear. How was school today?"

"Okay."

"What did you do today?" (Or, "What did you learn today?")

"Oh, not much."

End of conversation. The child and parent may not share anything else about what is happening at school because neither has any real enthusiasm for it, and neither has any deeper knowledge of how to share their concerns or interests. Teachers need to find ways of building the interest of students and parents for what is happening in the program. Theme Cycles make it more possible for parents to be partners in their children's learning.

### **TEACHER-TO-TEACHER**

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Cherry Ward, K-2 teacher in Townsville, Australia, seeks to build strong communication links with parents of her class. She uses frequent letters and notes in their homework folders to keep them informed about what is happening in the program and makes copies of her planning, including a list of the major resources she will use, available to parents so that they can support their children's learning at home and, where appropriate, send additional resources to school. At

times parents have particular expertise that they can share with the class. At the end of many Theme Cycles, Cherry and her class hold a celebration concert. On this early evening occasion, the class or individual books written during the unit will be officially launched. The children will perform songs and instrumental music from their program, display artwork and read pieces of their informational writing to the parents. The announcements are jointly written in the class and are all made by the children. One of the features of the celebrations is that they give all the children opportunities, rather than being confined to a few of the more advanced students. Although attendance at ordinary school meetings is not high, these occasions draw great crowds of supportive parents, relatives and friends.

One of her Theme Cycles focused on wheat. It included a trip to a bakery, but it also involved a talk from a parent who had grown up on a wheat farm and a demonstration of cooking chappatis by a mother who originated from India. The celebration concluded with a bread party where parents brought a great variety of types of bread that they had made or bought. There was considerable interest in the children's work but also a lot of communication among parents that added to the enthusiasm for what their children were achieving.

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## **THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN THEME CYCLES**

Although there are other aspects that could be discussed, three roles for the teacher in Theme Cycles will be outlined here.

### **CHOOSING LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES TO EXPLOIT THE CONTENT**

Especially during what we have termed the Enhancing Activities of a unit, the teacher combines attention to developing students' knowledge with activities that develop particular language abilities. Semantic webs open up vocabulary development; cloze passages constructed

on the unit theme by the teacher focus attention on specific aspects of language which can be talked about in a post-cloze discussion and extend comprehension; note-taking and reconstruction of texts develop the ability to select and retain information. These and many other activities are examples of how the teacher can use what the students are learning about to enhance their language skills. Most of the language activities within a unit should be chosen for their relevance to real life learning. For example, in a unit on spiders, teaching the genres of report writing and description is going to be more productive than activities that list the menu for a spider's lunch, or the spider's invitation to a party sent to a fly. That is not to say that such activities would not provide pleasure and variety for students, but it would make more impact on those students who transfer knowledge less readily if they learned to write menus in the course of preparing a meal, and invitations when inviting the principal and their parents to a display of their work.

### **MONITORING AND SUPPORTING STUDENTS' LEARNING**

One of the major purposes for using a thematic approach is that it makes independent learning more possible. Teachers need to be realistic in catering for the range of abilities within the class and in considering what their students are capable of doing. If the teacher's expectations are too low, the students will be restricted in their learning outcomes because they do not get the chance to think for themselves. If expectations are too high, the students may not obtain all the benefit that they should from the unit. Teachers need to monitor carefully the work of individual students, keeping anecdotal records, checklists and samples of work for portfolios to ensure that they are providing the optimal amount of support. Students who have difficulty completing work may need closer supervision than others. One danger to guard against is the self-fulfilling

prophecy that limits students' growth in independence because they already appear to lack independence.

### **FOCUSED LEARNING EPISODES, OR MINI-LESSONS**

As the teacher monitors the learning experiences of students, particular learning needs will emerge. Sometimes these will be for a solitary student, but very often it will be clear that the class, or at least a significant proportion of the students, would benefit from specific teaching of a skill. These teaching sessions focus on the particular need and give the students a chance to practice the new learning. An example would be teaching students different text structures or graphic displays for showing comparisons and contrasts. Or the teacher might find that although students know how to represent comparisons, some of them need to be taught how to take notes in a way that ensures that all of the criteria for comparison can be discussed. For example, if you are comparing frogs and toads, you cannot proceed from having information about the habitat of the frog and the feeding habits of the toad: you need matching details about each of them. A mini-lesson on such a topic could be fitted easily and effectively into the on-going work of the class.

### **PLANNING A UNIT: A GENERAL SEQUENCE**

Planning a Theme Cycle can begin in several different ways. The teacher can begin with an idea for one or more worthwhile activities, with an idea of the content to be explored, with a particular book or other experience as a starting point, or with a particular language function or ability that the students need to develop. Planning will not follow an invariable sequence, but the following sections will first describe a general planning procedure and then show how that can be applied to a particular Theme Cycle.

The first stage of planning can be simply a listing of books, experiences and worthwhile activities that come to mind immediately. With experience, teachers build up a repertoire of activities and ways of using resources. Usually, it is easier to plan the possible activities in separate subject areas. Although this conflicts in some ways with the idea of integrating across the curriculum, it provides a framework for recording the brainstorming process, directs and stimulates thinking and ensures that all areas of the curriculum will be considered, even though some may not be included in the final plan. The teacher seeks to make connections among the different areas, and there will be overlapping of activities. For example, an activity may be listed as part of the Science curriculum but involve brainstorming, listing and classifying and be seen also as promoting oral language and thinking skills.

The beginning stage of a plan, perhaps with the exception of some of the books listed, is likely to be open enough to suit several different grade levels. This has a side effect of being very beneficial to team planning in situations where teachers can work together. The initiating experiences may be shared but lead to different enhancing activities. (Of course, the early stages of the planning will not necessarily identify what is actually used as the Initiating Activity of the unit.) Teachers working in a team could brainstorm possible resources and activities together and then start to sort them into levels of application for different groupings of students. For example, a Grade 1 teacher and a Grade 5 teacher could go through this stage together, and then refine the plans for their own classes, but they might still benefit from teaming for at least some of the implementation of the plan. Because of the wide range of abilities evident in any class, whether it is multi-age or a single grade, the planned experiences and the difficulty level of the tasks must be kept broad. This breadth is also needed to cater for the differences in students' strengths and

interests that vary from one curriculum area to another. In general, older students will start a Theme Cycle with more background knowledge than will younger ones but their progress will not necessarily follow the same pathways.

An alternative way of starting the planning process is to ask the students to brainstorm possibilities or for the teacher and students to do this together. Many teachers using thematic approaches report that they were surprised at how effective it was to incorporate student input into their planning at different stages in the process (see also Farnsworth, 1990, and other chapters in Atwell, 1990). Many Theme Cycles have been initiated by the students' own interests and ideas. The teacher, of course, must always consider whether the idea which students come up with have enough potential learning opportunities and available resources to be worthy of extended study.

The teacher then researches the topic, gathers resources and considers possible visiting experts, excursions and artifacts to bring in to the classroom. As the plan takes shape, the teacher modifies the initial outline, adding or deleting planned worthwhile activities after obtaining further information and ideas from the resources consulted. The modifying process will take into account the relevance of different curriculum needs and perceptions about the students' learning needs. Figure X.x shows an outline plan for a unit for the primary grades on egg-laying or oviparous creatures that originated from Ruth Heller's book, *Chickens aren't the Only Ones*. The planning outline is then operationalized by sequencing the activities from the Initiating Activities through the Enhancing Activities to the Synthesizing Activities, and by the teacher considering what language and other skills will be emphasized as the class engages in learning content or subject matter.

The plan is put into effect, but it will be beneficial for it to remain flexible and adaptable throughout the unit. A Theme Cycle should always be a learning experience and not simply a matter of working through a prepared set of activities.

### GETTING STARTED

Here are two simple forms of project work – SUCCESS and PRISE - that may enable teachers who are new to this way of working to get started. Both of them appear to put emphasis on the outcomes of the learning rather than on how the learning takes place, but they give opportunities for both process and content objectives to be achieved in a short time.

The first is adapted from a business idea in Wurman (2001). SUCCESS Stories can be presented orally, but may also be written. They simply highlight something interesting that the student has learned on the thematic topic (or on self-chosen topics). In the earliest grades they might be presented as an “Interesting Facts” wall display with each student writing up one fascinating finding. Note that the success might be in learning a skill, and not just in learning facts. This activity gives a boost to the Initiating Activities phase of a unit, being part of that WOW! Experience.

SUCCESS Stories are very clearly focused. Students should be taught to make them:

**Short** – perhaps only about three sentences long. Young students might simply start from, “I learned that ... ,” but at later levels more variety adds impact for both the presenter and the audience.

**Unique** – this criterion helps students learn to express what they have learned rather than to copy the original wording.

**Clear** – avoid complex language and jargon. Again, this helps to prevent learners hiding behind the original language which may conceal lack of understanding.

**Concrete** – give specific details. For example in “What I learned in Math today” you want, “I learned that scalene triangles have three sides of different lengths,” not, “I learned about scalene triangles.”

**Exciting** – encourage students to be enthusiastic about this learning as a genuine achievement. Students have to know that they know interesting stuff.

**Sharing-oriented** – the purpose is not just to show what a student has learned but to make that learning available to others. That may mean that some time has to be allocated for questions from other learners to be answered.

**Strategic** – what do you want the listeners/readers to know? Writing with that in mind helps to build communication skills. Teachers also need to be strategic. A conversation with a student may lead to the teacher saying, “That would make a great SUCCESS story.”

The second “mini-project” approach is adapted from a classroom practice of Alan and Patty Engle which they call PROBE. The acronym PRISE is designed to convey the idea of leveraging open a topic of study in a short focused period of research. It represents: **P**rojects **R**eporting **I**nteresting **S**tuff **E**xpertly. A key issue in information reports is that the writer should be an **expert**. Often students of all ages appear to lack skills in writing in this genre, when the real problem is that they do not know enough about the topic to be able to select and present information effectively. PRISE reports will be brief – just one or two pages of text in a book or on a wall display – and backed up by an illustration, which could be a drawing or a graphic display such as a flow chart.

As well as providing the title, the acronym PRISE also denotes the steps or features of the project.

**Plan** – preferably the student identifies to the teacher in advance what the topic will be and how it will be undertaken. A brief plan for the project helps to prevent copying or mere paraphrasing of information.

**Research** – in the first efforts this might be from a single source, but PRISE studies should expand to use more than one source, though not too many.

**Illustrate** – students are learning to present information in more than one form. Selecting an effective way to convey information graphically as well as verbally is a valuable skill and requires teachers to model a range of possibilities over time.

**Summarize** – the wording of the report is the student’s own wording. It should report “interesting stuff” that the student has understood and plans to remember.

**Elaborate** – the PRISE project should have some feature that personalizes the learning to demonstrate that the author is an expert in this topic. For example, in a PRISE on Clouds the student might include a titled sketch or photograph made of a cloud in the sky on the day of the study. It is helpful if students get the opportunity to share their reports, perhaps in small groups, as this also aids retention of the information as real learning, not just a written product.

Most thematic units will be much more complex than SUCCESS Stories or PRISE, but these are ways of getting started on wider studies, and useful activities to provide opportunities for consolidating and sharing learning within thematic units.

## SUMMARY

The variety of Thematic Approaches to learning adds interest to the program for both the teacher and the students, but they also facilitate learning by making connections easier. Teachers can plan integrated activities that give scope for a wide range of explorations of ideas, learning of interesting content and development of language and other skills. When students participate in the planning process they are more likely to understand and appreciate what they are learning. Thematic approaches can be more difficult to implement for the teacher because of the adaptability required, but the advantages in interest and learning gains will repay the effort.

## PATHWAYS TO THEME CYCLES

### The Student:

- > Connects information from many different sources
- > Recognizes the relationships among different ideas
- > Experiences a variety of working styles
- > Uses language for real purposes in many curriculum areas
- > Develops independence and interdependence in undertaking studies
- > Demonstrates learning in a wide variety of ways

### The Teacher:

- > Realizes the advantages of teaching language and other skills while students are engaged in learning content matter

- > Becomes more adaptable in planning activities which cater for students' needs and interests and modifying plans as units progress
- > Makes realistic connections amongst different areas of the curriculum
- > Involves colleagues and parents in building a community of learners

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#### CLASSROOM VIGNETTE

Melbourne Grade 6 teacher Judy Menotti stimulated her class's interest in varied aspects of their environment and how it affected their lives. Students began a range of individual and group explorations of the relationship of people to their environments. These studies kept branching and extending throughout the curriculum for a whole year's program. The students identified and defined many needs and problems and undertook research on issues, wrote letters, listened to guest speakers they had invited, went on field trips and reported in depth in a variety of ways to each other on their own studies. They developed very sophisticated skills in planning their activities, co-coordinating their work with others and in communication. The classroom was always filled with interesting displays mounted by the students themselves and the students passed on much of what they were learning to students in other classes.

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**CLASSROOM VIGNETTE**

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