

Essential Characteristics of Powerful Units

Alliance for Powerful Learning

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Our Assumptions: A unit is a multiweek learning experience which is organized as a coherent plan for the investigation of a theme question of enduring value beyond the classroom. It is distinguished from simply a collection of engaging lessons by its clear focus on the development of enduring understandings couched in a compelling multidisciplinary theme. Chosen themes should engage the intellectual curiosity and imagination of young adolescents, and draw upon a wide array of content knowledge from varying subject areas. Finally, powerful units ought to involve investigation, inquiry, and authentic product development.

A. Unit Goals are

- “enduring”, representing understandings and skills of lifelong value that are developed over time; transferable. They focus on Big Ideas at the heart of a discipline
- framed as generalizations: specific enough to guide teaching and assessing, but overarching enough to allow for transfer
- framed by provocative, essential unit questions with important subquestions
- coherent and relevant to the students
- aligned with common core and state standards

B. The Unit Plan

- is coherent and logical
- uses an interdisciplinary lens to deepen cross-content understandings in meaningful ways
- is appropriately sequenced (both conceptually and in terms of activities):
 - from simple to more difficult
 - from prior knowledge review to new knowledge acquisition to application including any instruction students may need to equip them to succeed
- has key benchmarks established at appropriate intervals during the Unit
- has adequate and flexible time allotment(s)
- lists all essential and supplementary resources and materials

C. Assessments

- insure that quality and mastery criteria are transparent to students
- provide evidence of the desired enduring understandings and skills
- include a broad menu of assessments: pre, formative, summative and self-assessments
- include a performance assessment component
- employ clearly delineated rubrics that define quality & proficiency in all goal areas
- are used to monitor on-going progress and guide additional instruction
- provide opportunities for students to exhibit understanding and proficiency through authentic performance tasks
- allow for a variety of learning styles and intelligences
- build on each other to facilitate learning
- account for both individual and collective performance

- include steady opportunities for students to reflect and self-assess

D. Unit Learning Experiences engage students and require them to:

- know where they're going, why, what they already know, what is required of them, and where they might go wrong
- have opportunities to rehearse, revise, and refine their work
- explore and experience key concepts to build strong content knowledge
- learn vocabulary related to big ideas and concepts
- work with primary source materials of quality and substance, and also with experts beyond the classroom
- read purposefully and listen attentively to gain both general knowledge and discipline-specific expertise
- become proficient in new areas through inquiry, research and study
- demonstrate independence and critical thinking
- comprehend and evaluate complex texts across a range of types and disciplines
- construct effective arguments and convey intricate or multifaceted information
- refine and share their knowledge through writing and speaking:
 - a. respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline.
 - b. comprehend, critique and evaluate
 - c. cite specific and relevant evidence to support oral or written interpretations or arguments
 - d. evaluate others' use of evidence
- use technology and digital media strategically and capably
- apply reading and writing tools
- demonstrate initiative and responsibility for their time and actions
- collaborate effectively
- understand other perspectives and cultures