

Unit Studies

Homeschooling parents today are faced with a jungle of choices when searching for the right resources for their children's studies. Curriculum confusion abounds, and a common mistake that we make is thinking that curriculum means a certain set of textbooks and workbooks. In actuality, 'curriculum' is any person, place or thing that is used to help facilitate learning. The word 'curriculum' comes from a root which means "a course to be run." Curriculum should be an individualized plan of study determined by the 'course' each particular student is inclined to 'run.' Even though most new (and veteran) homeschooling parents are fiercely determined to break the mold of the traditional experience, many turn, sometimes in frustration, back to the methods and materials that they were familiar with as kids. Textbooks and worksheets. Keep in mind that, even though curriculum planning can begin with textbooks, it should develop into learning experiences far beyond the pages of a book. From our personal schooling experiences we identify with textbooks ... and until the last 5 to 7 years, there were very few resources readily available to assist parents. (See the end of this article for excellent resources!)

A Common Scene

You've bought all those shiny, colorful, brand new textbooks (with teacher's manuals, of course) and you are feeling really in charge... confident. You're excited about your first homeschool support group meeting, which is well known as a group guaranteed to build you up and shape you into a first-rate home educator. You managed to get a baby-sitter (so you KNOW this is God's will) and you only had to drive around the block twice before you found the correct address. But to be on the safe side, you waited until people started arriving, checked them out to make sure they looked like homeschoolers. (This could be a trap set by the local superintendent's office.) Safe inside, you are greeted by warm, responsive people-that-look-like-parents. You instantly sense an air of camaraderie and feel comfortably accepted -- like the time you joined a secret club when you were a kid. The small talk begins and as always, the first question that comes up in any starter conversation among homeschool parents is "So, what are you using?"- referring to curriculum (not birth control). You happily explain your professional teaching manuals and beautiful textbooks and make sure to mention the great deal you got on the workbooks -- you really need to make a good impression -- even if you are a rookie. Looking around for approval, you notice the couple over on the couch whispering and glancing at you with sympathy-filled eyes. The lady next to you shakes her head and pats your hand reassuringly. Suddenly, you feel as though you have just announced that you are dying of cancer. Then the lady sitting on the other side of you pulls a huge yellow book out of her standard-issue homeschooler's duffle bag. It is bigger than any coffee table Bible you have ever seen, yet smaller than the New York City yellow pages. And speaking of coffee tables, suddenly you notice a four inch thick binder on the one in front of you. From its cover, a child's happy face smiles serenely up at you. For some reason, you're not getting the approval you anticipated, and to make matters worse, everyone begins speaking at you simultaneously. They're using words like 'units,' 'integrated,' 'hand's-on,' and something foreign sounding like konos and what was that other one ...weaver? Maybe you've stumbled into the local crafter's club... you begin to turn hot with embarrassment.

Sound bizarre? I have witnessed similar scenes in other support group meetings. New homeschooling parents are still not familiar with the unit method of teaching, even though their children have been learning that way since birth. Although it is gaining popularity with the advent of wonderful unit study materials, still too many homeschoolers are trying to reproduce a system at home based on regular 'school,' which is usually a failure at home just as it is in the schools. Too many parents are settling for crumbs when, with the homeschooling advantage, they have been invited to a smorgasbord.

The homeschooling adventure gives parents the daily opportunity to explore new avenues of learning, and to experiment with methods that work best for each child. It's about families learning together, without the confines of overstructure and constricting molds. The key to successful family learning is balance. Finding the right mix which will give mom and dad the confidence they need, while providing the children with materials and methods tailored to fit their need to learn. Because textbooks abound, and because they represent a certain comfort level, most new homeschoolers start out with them. Textbooks provide that needed feeling of security. But the danger of frustration and failure is ever present when homeschooling parents try to copy traditional schooling methods at home. Too many parents and children become discouraged and burn out, trying to use methods and materials that are neither necessary or productive in the tutorial environment of the family-school. I write these words from experience.

The unit study method, considered the 'Rolls Royce of learning' by master teachers can easily be integrated into any homeschool program, and before long, your children will be begging you for more 'school'!

Unit Studies...

"Unit Studies," "Project Studies" or "Integrated Learning" - whatever it's called, this method takes advantage of the child's natural curiosity and works with the natural learning processes to produce real education that's also fun! This approach integrates several subjects and skill areas while focusing on a central theme. Combining a variety of books, resources and learning tools, it fosters interest, creativity, thinking and reasoning skills, research skills, in-depth learning and motivation for learning. The whole family can participate. Each child can work around the same theme, but work on different activities according to their individual skill level. Even mom and dad can get into the act.

I am not going to tell you to throw your textbooks away. No, even textbooks can be useful and can become a starting point. Used like an encyclopedia, they can be valuable for simple research. Since they deal with topics that are normally covered in most school systems - this gives you a track to follow with your children. One textbook can be used for several children, and for different aged children. You can even mix and match - taking topics out of various textbooks - finding related stories in reading texts - using other textbooks just for map work or research like you would use encyclopedias. (Good high school texts are particularly useful for this.) Look through various levels of textbooks for similar topics and create an index for reference purposes, or better yet, take the texts apart, label them by grade level, and file the related sections in manilla folders. (Yes, cut them apart.)

A Personal Illustration

Our family got involved in a unit on astronomy which I thought might last for a week or two, and which actually stretched into about 9 weeks. Jill was around 6th grade level and Jonathan was in 2nd grade. We started by using Jill's Science text for basic information. She looked up important scientists and inventors related to the study of astronomy in her textbook chapter, and made a list of vocabulary words for us to study and learn. We decided to begin a simple search of the solar system, so began with the nine planets.

We each chose three (this was before we knew there might be ten) - mom was included in this project. After reading about the planets in a couple of textbooks we had, the children decided that there just wasn't enough information - Jonathan was particularly interested in Pluto. So we set off for the library and ended up bringing home about 40 books - not only on the planets, but about astronomers, inventions, rocket ships, space travel, some videos and even some star chart maps - all different levels, and most with lots of pictures and illustrations. I even found some interesting story books with good information, which would be enjoyable as well as educational. Jill decided to read about Galileo and Johannes Kepler. Jonathan wanted to know more about the sun and the moon, and all of us decided we wanted to stretch this learning experience to include the stars and space exploration. And we definitely wanted to build a model of the solar system somehow. So, I knew that the rest of the texts and workbooks would have to be laid aside for a while.

Spelling and vocabulary centered around "astronomy" words. Reading lessons were taken right from the books that they had chosen from the library. Instead of doing a lot of written question and answers, we spent really meaningful time on discussion - on questions that the kids raised as we went along (critical thinking). And instead of me trying to answer the questions, we spent a lot of time looking things up. That, by the way is called 'developing research skills.' Writing skills were developed in similar fashion as Jill wrote a paper on Johannes Kepler, and Jonathan dictated what he had learned for me to write down. Our solar system model was the icing on the cake. Of course, the whole unit was a science project that eventually launched us into history. As we read biographies of scientists and inventors we studied periods of history, located countries and cities on maps and began developing a timeline.

The planets were researched: their moons, their characteristics, sizes, distance from the sun, etc. After deciding to use our kitchen ceiling as "space" Jill calculated the sizes and distances of the solar system to scale - which, incidentally, was math - and no easy job. Only one-fourth of the sun would fit in one corner and that took Jonathan almost a whole day to make and paint. The scale of measurement had to be adjusted several times so that we would have planets that could be seen with the naked eye. Jill finally decided that the Earth should be 1" and we took it from there. As we became involved with the stars, starting with the sun, of course, that study took us further into space exploration, which led us back to the early explorers and the development of navigation. This unit became almost limitless but it propelled us into the new frontiers of outside-of-the-textbook creativity and unit studies.

Now, here comes the "roll your sleeves up and get to work" part. Are you imagining yourself drowning in piles of books and supplies while all dreams of contact with the adult social world fade into a "unit study fog"? Take heart. It's never as hard as we imagine! Usually.

In planning units of study for your family, one of the most difficult things to envision is the actual scheduling of your day - "How is this going to look on paper?" or "How am I going to justify this as bona fide schoolwork in my lesson planner for the end-of-year assessment?" Just thinking about this can send homeschooling moms into a panic! On pure reflex-action, they reach for that stack of workbooks and start mechanically writing page numbers in their plan book. After studying this common phobia, I came to the conclusion that the nagging fear for most parents was that their children might not be "getting" the basic skills in a "correct" way.

Although I would really like to convince you that reading, language arts and math skills can be fully developed with the unit study approach (and it is possible), I personally feel that these areas are more likely to be enriched through units. For the sake of parental sanity and discernible progress in the children, I recommend that you set aside a daily "skills" period - perhaps thirty minutes to one-hour per day when the children follow a regular routine in math and language arts. During this time they will practice sequentially the skills that might really need work - again, depending on the needs of your child. A reminder: please avoid the temptation of assigning mounds of superfluous pages and problems just for the sake of filling up your lesson planner.

When looking for materials to build the 3 R's skills, the choices are many. I have personal favorites, as do you, and I lean in favor of those materials that will creatively motivate learning. Look for integrated language arts programs: combining spelling, vocabulary, grammar, writing, penmanship with wholesome practical reading. Games and hands-on arithmetic materials are always effective and especially important for younger children. In developing any curriculum plan, try to find ways to incorporate three important modalities: hands-on activities (kinesthetic learning), observation activities

(visual learning), and listening/verbal (auditory learning). Educational research is proving this to be key in developing the widest range of thinking and learning skills (this is why units are so effective).

So, with this in mind, when the time to 'document' comes along, you will be able to show a separate period for Math, and under Language Arts - reading, spelling, penmanship, writing, grammar. The Unit Studies section of the day or week will form a larger heading and take up more space. Here you will list activities and perhaps code them: (B) Bible (R) reading, (SR) silent reading, (OR) oral report, (WR) writing, (SC) science, (SS) social studies, (M) math, (GE) geography etc. For instance, under Unit Studies for Tuesday you might write, "...made salt dough relief map of our state (GE, SS); read about our state government and gave a report to dad at dinner" (SS,R,OR).

Don't forget to give credit where credit is due in other areas of learning. Cooking can be (CH)emistry, (M)ath and (PR)actical living. Hobbies, jobs and recreational activities provide some of the most important learning times, and can be categorized under Home Economics, Auto Shop, Gym, Mechanics, Computer, Woodworking, Economics, etc. Also, reading in any subject area can fall under the official heading of (R) Reading. Be flexible and creative.

Documentation ...

Now that you're ready to document your unit study plan, your next task is to actually plan a unit. Start with the books you have on hand. The grade level doesn't really matter because you are looking for topics. Find a unit or chapter that looks especially interesting - this will motivate you, and your excitement, in turn, will motivate your children. Interest is the first motivator for learning. Find a unit with different people to study about or a topic that is particularly appealing. You might go ahead and choose six topics from different textbooks - perhaps three in science and three in social studies... this is only a suggestion for organizational purposes. Choose topics that will lend themselves well to other resources you have on hand. Think: "What kinds of activities could I include under this topic? What kinds of field trips could we plan? Who do I know that might know something about this topic - friends, relatives, neighbors, church members, business owners... the librarian?" Librarians love homeschoolers because we are really interested in finding out about all the free things we can get from the library. They like that. Your community can be your greatest resource.

The next step in planning your study is quite simple. Look through the book, chapter or unit you have chosen and brainstorm. Quickly scan and write down the things that "jump out" at you. Notice pictures, illustrations, boldfaced words, titles, maps, charts, animals, plants, people, places... anything that impacts your mind on an initial quick-scan of the chapter material. Take your list - and there might be twenty things or more - and begin to group them into manageable topics.

An example:

A typical chapter on Central America may yield a veritable gold mine of topics, but try to limit them depending on the ages of your children. Some likely topics might be: The Original Native Population, Christopher Columbus' Early Explorations, Central American Geography, Central American Plants and Animals, Central America Today. An in-depth learning experience involving 3 or 4 topics is far superior to a shallow perusal of dozens of unrelated facts that are quickly forgotten after the test. This chapter provides enough for social studies, history, geography, geology, natural science and political science. Then go back through the section and pick out a few details to include under each topic, such as:

Original Native Population:

Tribes
Customs
Economy
Education
Language
Religions
Food

Recreation
Central American Geography:
Mountainous Regions
Desert Regions
Islands
Rivers
Coastal Plains
Jungles

Again, make this as general or as detailed as you like. It is best to sit down with the children and decide which topics really catch their interest. You can encourage each child to choose topics of their choice and let them share their learning with the rest of the family, or you can work together on topics, suggesting easier projects to the younger students, and more complicated ones to the older students. As you become more secure, you'll find the children will be naturally excited about certain areas... so please let them go and explore to their heart's content. And don't even try to keep up!

Skills to Include:

As briefly discussed earlier: vocabulary, reading, spelling, oral reports, written work, research, hands-on experience with the topic, art, music, and literature and practical life application. Start with the vocabulary of the unit or topic - a good text usually includes this somewhere in the chapter or go through the section and pick out key words - words that will be meaningful to the study of the topic. Assign these to older children for vocabulary building and spelling.

If your topic study will include important people, have the children choose several from the chapter and start researching, taking basics from the textbooks and then locating more information from library books, encyclopedias, by interviewing

people, or by visiting a museum and finding information. By all means, mom and dad, try not to have all the answers for your students, no matter how brilliant you want your offspring to think you are. Help them formulate the questions that need to be answered, and lead them in the direction where they'll find the answers. Good teachers encourage young minds to explore and search, and in that process, life-equipping skills are developed.

Reading is topic related. Find a variety of reading materials for the children to explore - books can include fiction, non-fiction, magazines, dictionaries, encyclopedias, almanacs, newspapers, picture files, maps, charts, etc., etc. Have a period set aside daily where you read something together, either taking turns or mom or dad reads... at our house we used to call it STORY STOP and it was one of our favorite times right after lunch. Then, talk about what you read. Everyone has an opinion, and children need to be encouraged to organize and share their thoughts. You can also get more 'reports' and research accomplished if you let the children give oral presentations and fewer written reports. When it comes down to the writing-get creative!

Some More Ideas ...

Here are some ideas for your children: instead of simply copying mundane facts and figures, try imagining how certain people felt when particular things happened to them, and how they would describe their situation, or write a journal from someone's perspective, or write a play reenacting some things you have learned. Sometimes children don't want to write because they haven't mastered spelling or penmanship, so perhaps you can spark their interest by using a typewriter, word processor, or computer. Younger children need to get their ideas on paper before those thoughts 'escape,' so I encourage you to let them dictate their stories to you or older siblings. The very process of thought organization is an important pre-writing skill. Get your children to think in terms of "Cause and Effects." What really caused this war? ... what really motivated Columbus to do what he did? ... what would have happened if he had turned back...? Children need to learn about decision-making and how the consequences can be of historic proportions.

For hands-on experiences, glean ideas from your reading and research for projects and field trips. Make models of things, draw pictures, dress the way they would have during a certain time period, create the menus of various countries, learn customs and try practicing them. Draw maps, real and imaginary, play games - there are all kinds of educational ones available - or use your computer to supplement. Plan field trips, or watch videos or films. If you can, try to include Time Period art and literature in the study of a famous person or event. This can also encompass the philosophies and religion of an age or a culture. Another effective yet simple activity is the creation of a timeline. Building onto it as you go along over the years is a creative and interesting learning experience.

I hope you can see that one thing always seems to lead to another. Once you get the "hang" of it you will probably be hooked... and it can all start with textbooks. One mother recently wrote me after reading one of my articles, "Thank you for your encouragement. I started a unit study on Greece and we love it. It's fun and the children are really learning. Although I am still apprehensive, we are trying to break our old ways of using standard worksheets and textbooks. You helped dismiss many of those concerns for which I am grateful." (A. V., MA)

All I ask is that you try, and keep trying. You can achieve unit study success!

by Jane R. Boswell

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