

Curricular Unit: Nurturing the Self-Directed Learner
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Introduction and Rationale

As our society grows more complex, success at work and at home depend more and more on an individual's abilities to seek information for him or herself and to plan his or her life around the demands of multiple activities. As critical as these skills are, the vast majority of students leave high school without them. There seems to be an assumption that students will learn these skills in the real-life experiences of employment or college. However, college dropout rates and job turnover rates for young adults suggest that post-graduation is too late to start learning these skills. If we want our young people to successfully manage their lives after graduation, they must have the opportunity to learn and practice these self-directed learning and project planning at the high school level.

This unit is designed upon the concept of writing as a means of self-education. Using the skills of reading, thinking and writing, people can participate as members of the learning community and expand the scope of that community. School is a springboard for such participation. Therein, individuals learn to use those skills for engaging in a lifetime of learning. However, lifelong engagement develops only when school gains purpose through personal meaning and relevance. This workshop design encourages students to assert personal ownership and responsibility for their learning through a self-directed research project on topic(s) of their choosing.

A major concern anytime students are given control of their own work is that they will not take the project seriously and simply not do the work. In considering this criticism further, I find that it actually argues for such a curriculum. We resist giving students the personal responsibility for their work, and consequently their behavior shows they can not handle responsibility. It is a

vicious cycle. Part of our role as educators is to provide students the opportunities to practice, and sometimes fail, in a supportive environment, with safety nets so to speak.

I have designed this unit with that criticism strongly in mind. Students are held accountable for their work and personal assignments on a daily basis, through short check-in/ check-out notes and reflective journaling. These two strategies encourage students to hold themselves accountable to the teacher and, more importantly, to themselves.

Objectives:

5.A.4a Develop a research plan using multiple forms of data.

The skills of self-education also include planning, time management, problem-solving, locating and using resources. Among other Illinois State Learning Standards, this assignment emphasizes the importance of reading as research for gathering information and as a tool for learning new forms of writing. Writing in this workshop will focus on imitation of such forms, with attention to audience, the organization of thought and the exploration of personal writing style. It should be stressed that these standards are met implicitly and that self-directed study remains the overt focus of this unit. Successful performance of the self-directed learning will lead to success in these other objectives.

Content:

The research assignment directs students to independently explore and learn a range of forms and audiences of nonfiction writing. Content, then, is the most adaptable feature of this unit. The organizational structure can be applied to any number of content areas. In the case of this unit, students will choose two to three different types of nonfiction, to produce their own imitatively written examples of those types of nonfiction.

Daily Organizational Structure

The following describes the daily framework within which students may pursue their own learning. The check-in/ check-out system provides accountability and ensures that students who need individual attention will be sure of getting it during that class. As students enter class, they hand-in an enter slip which states what they will be doing during class, a general project update and/or request for a teacher conference. Enter / exit slips will be filed with the students' portfolios.

Once checked-in, students may go directly to work. If the teacher feels the need for a group talk before starting work, this can be stated as slips are collected or by written announcement on the board. Ten minutes before the class ends, students need to reflect on their work using a journal format, or an optional worksheet (Appendix A) in which they write what they've done and what still needs to be done, as homework and/or in class tomorrow.

Then, based on this journals or plan forms, students create an exit slip summing what they will do for homework that night, any project update, if they need a conference during office hours or by e-mail or if they need access to specific technologies like audio cassette, headphones computer lab time or a library pass.

If a student does not assign him or herself homework, they need to state why and get approval. For example, an away soccer game tonight, play rehearsal, family events are all acceptable reasons for not planning homework. In such a case, that student needs to state what they would do if they weren't busy and when they plan to make-up that work for themselves. An example of unacceptable justification might be, "I can get it all done in class, I don't need homework". Basically, this project will require reading or writing something between every class.

Daily Schemata:**Day one: *Unit and Content Introduction***

1. Introduce the purpose and organization of the nonfiction self-directed project using a unit syllabus as an instructional outline for the day.
2. Explain how this syllabus can be used as a tool for organizing and directing a personal learning plan.
3. Define nonfiction and a variety nonfiction forms. Choose one nonfiction form to contextualize the following discussion.
5. Discuss the daily organization of workshop classes: check-in, self-directed work and check-out.
6. Assign homework:
 - Think about the times you feel you learned a lot and/ or enjoyed learning. What activities were you involved in during that experience? Write down these activities.
 - Select a work of nonfiction (newspaper, magazine, biography, anything) think about what kind of nonfiction you're interested in learning about. Bring a list of three nonfiction forms and, if you can, also samples of that kind of fiction.

Day two: *Project Orientation and Planning Demonstration*

4. The nonfiction samples you brought are the content of your project, what you will teach yourselves. The activities you wrote down are the starting points for how you teach-learn. We're going to combine these with reading, thinking and writing to create your plan.
5. A project plan involves content, activities and timing. That is, what you're studying, how you're studying it and when you're doing it. You've got two parts, now let's fit it in a schedule.

6. Read-talk the students through the *Guidelines Planning Your Project* handout.
7. Suggest it may be helpful to think about planning activities in terms of reading time, thinking time and production (writing) time.
8. Model the planning process by taking students through the process of designing a one-week plan, using an overhead projector and referring to the *Guidelines* handout. If possible, work through a Question-Answer process with a student, using his or her individual criteria to demonstrate the process of accommodating personal needs to a plan.
9. Preview tomorrow's organization and goals.
10. Assign homework: draft a preliminary self-education plan, come to class with questions and at least one written on an enter-slip.

Days three & four: *Project Planning*

11. Begin using the check-in-work-check-out framework.
12. Students design a one week plan of daily class work and homework, students may work in groups of four maximum.
13. Individual questions are addressed through one-on-one time. For common questions, bring the class together to address as a group. If students complete a functional design, which meets with my approval, during these two days, those students may begin their plan immediately.

Days five – nine: *Project-in-Progress*

During this period in the unit, students will test their planning skills, evaluating and amending their plans on a daily basis. By the end of this period, students will have documented their own history of strategies that did and did not work for them.

14. Each day proceeds according to the check-in, work, check-out organization, detailed previously.
15. Students engage their plans according to the previous guidelines and their own plans.
16. Based on the check-in notes, coordinate individual time to address these needs. If free time appears, use it to check-in personally with as many students as possible.

Day ten: *Prepare to Wrap-up Unit.*

17. Begin class with check-in.
18. Then, before going to individual work, discuss preparation of portfolios which will be turned in next session.
19. Explain that follow-up conferencing on their final portfolios will be held during class starting one week after turning in the portfolios. Send round a sign-up sheet with 5 or 10 minute slots. Conferences can be held during another writing workshop or during a movie-celebration.
20. Assign writing reflection on their experiences with this learning unit. Be sure to address both the content you taught yourself, in this case nonfiction, and what it was like to make your own learning plan.
21. If no further questions arise, break into independent work, proceeding according to the *day five-nine* schedule.

22. Day eleven: *Wrap-up*

1. Students turn in their portfolios, to which such items as enter-exit slips will be added.
2. Review objectives for this unit: self-directed learning, content goals (nonfiction), planning.
3. Lead a discussion. Try to hit all of the following questions, emphasizing how students can take control of their learning and that self-directed study can help them learn anywhere, anytime, on the job, on their own, and especially with classes they might otherwise give

up on. With the ideas of self-directed learning, students can make sure their educational needs are met.

What did you learn?

- about self-directed learning?
 - about nonfiction?
 - about teachers and teaching?
 - What is it like to learn this way?
 - Did this unit work for you?
 - Why or why not?
- Were there times that you wished you had more teacher direction?
 - What do you think the teacher's role can or should be in a unit like this?
 - What else can you learn this way?
 - Are there times were this sort of learning will not work well?

Day twelve: Leave empty to accommodate spill-over. If not needed, begin the next unit.

Evaluation

The portfolio will include:

- samples of nonfiction forms which the students chose to learn
- their written performance of that form
- their enter/ exit slips
- progress journal entries
- all versions of the learning plans
- wrap-up reflection

Since the focus of this unit is to nurture students skills to use reading, thinking and writing for self-directed learning, assessment considers the quality of their final product and the degree to which students actively engaged in their own learning plan.

Guidelines Planning Your Project

In the course of the following week, **you need to produce three samples of your own writing that show what you have learned about three different nonfiction forms.** You choose which forms.

As you create your learning plan, keep the three main tasks of **reading, thinking and writing** in mind. How you prefer to do these tasks helps you determine what schedule pattern will work for you. You may prefer to do all of these all the time (e.g. while reading you make notes of what you're thinking and jump directly into the drafting and revising process). So, you might schedule your days according to begin, middle and end times. Or, if you may prefer to do these separately (e.g. Read. Think. Write.), you might find it helpful to schedule reading time, thinking time and writing time.

Also consider what helps you read, think and write. These answers help you **decide what specific activities you do each day.** Are you a talk-thinker, a drawing-thinker, a walking-thinker, music-thinker, etc.... Do you prefer to read silently, orally, with an audio-book or on the computer. Writing, do you prefer to write many drafts or just a few? How much time do you need between writing a draft and revising it? Do you need quiet or noise to write?

Regarding the final products, do you prefer to perfect one writing sample before moving onto the next? Or, do you prefer to work on all three simultaneously? When scheduling your writing, be sure to include draft, **peer and teacher review with at least two revisions before writing your final draft.**

Do you prefer to write a schedule for the entire unit before starting to work? Or, do you prefer to only schedule a few days at a time? Here, I will require that you schedule for **at least three days ahead.** Everyday, you need to examine your plan to see if you need to make changes and, in the case of those who plan only a few days at a time, you'll need to extend your plan each day by at least one day. For example, say you have a three day plan. At the end of day one, you will check-in with your schedule and plan for day four so that your total plan is still three days long.