Expected Outcomes:

• Topics and themes: important but different

• Topics → Themes ← Thematic planning

• Design a skeleton unit based on an effective theme
Framing Questions:

• What are characteristics of an effective theme?

• How can an effective theme guide planning, instruction, and assessment?

• What is the relationship between an effective theme and a good story?
How are a topic and a theme alike?
How are a topic and a theme different?
Topic

- Content
- Static
- Discrete
- Content
- Noun
- Implies a definition

Theme

- Organization
- Movement/ progress toward a goal
- Integrative; might include several topics
- Context
- Verb
- Implies a story
Selecting a theme is not so much a matter of choosing the right words or phrase; instead it is a matter of defining the cluster of elements that create a whole and cohesive learning experience. What we call that theme may be a summary--or a suggestion--of the entire experience, or it may reflect the story line or the big idea that guides the experience.
An effective theme needs to be:

- Interesting
- Meaningful to the students: it matters
- Culturally rich
- Evocative of rich language use
- Designed to develop an enduring understanding
- Developed in “story form,” using the characteristics of a good story
Invitation

If you are a dreamer, come in,
If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar,
A hope-er, a pray-er, a magic bean buyer…
If you’re a pretender, come sit by my fire
For we have some flax-golden tales to spin.

Come in!

Come in!

Shel Silverstein

*Where the Sidewalk Ends*, 1974
The universe is made of stories, not atoms.

Muriel Rukeyser
What makes a good story?
What makes a good story?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suspense</th>
<th>Humor</th>
<th>Care about Characters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interesting Details</td>
<td>Beginning, Middle, End</td>
<td>How it is told /written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has a message</td>
<td>Touches feelings</td>
<td>Connects w/audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matters to the teller</td>
<td>Surprise</td>
<td>How it “lands”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Look what I’ve done!
Look what I can do!
Look what I have learned!
The qualities of a good story are the qualities of a good:

- theme
- unit
- lesson
- activity

Clear BEGINNING

Appeals to emotions

Sparks the imagination

Satisfying conclusion

Interesting, meaningful

Clear MIDDLE

and

END
Story Form Structure

**Beginning**
- Motivation
- Engagement of the Learner

**Middle**
- Activity toward a Goal
- Participation by the Learner
Story Form Structure

End

• Outcome
  • Product
  • Solution
  • Resolution
• Achievement of Goal by the Learner
Strategies for Developing/Intensifying Story Form

- Prediction
- Product
- Puzzle
- Pattern \(\rightarrow\) Surprise
- Pose a challenge
- Performance
- Publication
- Problem to solve
- Provide a frame
- Play a game

Purpose
How can we move from Topic to Theme???
Topic -> Theme: Key Questions

• What is most important about this topic?
• What is affectively engaging about it?
• Why should it matter to learners?
• Where is it going? What is the potential for a story line?

Adapted from Kieran Egan
Teaching as Storytelling, 1986
Topic -> Theme: Key Questions

• What is **most important** about this **topic**?
  ➢ For this class, this group of students
  ➢ At this point in the curriculum
  ➢ That makes it enduring: a BIG idea
  ➢ That gives it “real-world” application
Topic -> Theme: Key Questions

• What is affectively engaging about it?
  ➢ For this class, this group of students
  ➢ At this point in the curriculum
  ➢ That helps students to care, or maybe to laugh
  ➢ That transfers to “real-world” experiences
Topic -> Theme: Key Questions

• Why should it matter to learners?
  ➢ to this class, this group of students
  ➢ Does it help them do or learn about something they are interested in?
  ➢ Does it help them to succeed, to feel a sense of accomplishment?
  ➢ Does it relate to their own “real-world” experiences?

Does it matter to the teacher?
Topic --> Theme: Key Questions

• What is the potential for a story line?
  ➢ Beginning > Middle > End
  ➢ How does the unit “land?”
  ➢ How does the ending give students a sense of accomplishment and provide evidence of their learning?
  ➢ Does the unit unfold, like a story? Is there a problem or puzzle to solve?
Does clothing tell a story?

Travels in China with a peanut allergy/gluten intolerance.

A surprise party for Grandma.

The haunted house.
- Clothing
- Holidays
- Food
- Animals
- Family
- School
- House
- Seasons
- Pastimes
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The Landing: Group Task

- Choose a topic
- Design a skeleton of a thematic unit
- Present your skeleton to the group
- If time, choose another topic to work through.
Topic: School

Theme: School makeover, student edition

Enduring Understanding:

Students will understand that they can influence the world around them.

“Landing”:

Students write, illustrate, and present the proposal to an audience. If possible, they also complete one of the projects proposed.
Skeleton Unit Plan:

Topic:

Theme:

Enduring Understanding: 
*Students will understand that*…

Story line:

Final Assessment:
• What is most important about this topic?
• What is affectively engaging about it?
• Why should it matter to learners?
• Where is it going? What is the potential for a story line?

Adapted from Kieran Egan
Look what I’ve done!
Look what I can do!
Look what I have learned!
Development of the theme and the skeleton plan is just the beginning.

There are many more decisions to make, based on this good start:
For a handout version of this presentation, send an email to:

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Topic on the Move
First Steps in Thematic Planning

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