

What is a Unit Study?

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“Unit study” is the name given to a type of curriculum tool where one topic is taken and looked at, or studied from many different aspects. They are called “cross-curricular” in approach, looking at the given topic across many areas of learning including science, history, geography, literature, and others. A unit study can be called a thorough look at a single topic, as if you could pick up the topic in your hand and spin it like a globe, looking at the various components in all three dimensions.

How does this compare with textbook curriculum? First, understand that textbook curriculum is broken down by segments or areas of specific knowledge. For example, a textbook curriculum for a third grader might include a science textbook, a social studies textbook, a language arts textbook, readers, a math textbook, and perhaps a health textbook, along with many assorted workbooks that accompany these textbooks. Each textbook contains summarized information regarding key topics that the publisher has chosen to be important for that particular age and grade of learning, summarized in the publisher’s scope and sequence.

With that said, I must say that I was educated using a textbook approach in both public and private schools. There was not much that I looked forward to during my years of schooling, with the exception of our weekly library visit, which was very brief. I loved to read real books, and I tolerated textbooks – the faster I could get through with them each night, the more time that I had for “real” reading. I was an excellent student, and made good grades – but I was never really challenged to think or wonder or reason.

It wasn’t until I arrived at engineering college that I realized just how short-changed my education had been. When I had my first exam, there were two questions and five blank pieces of paper – no “True/False” questions, no “Fill in the Blank” questions, no “Circle the Correct Answer” questions – time to panic! I had been educated all those years to memorize the bolded words, answer brief questions at the end of the chapters that were about the bolded words, and regurgitate information that had absolutely no real meaning in the big picture of life. I had to learn how to think, really think and reason, when I got to college, and I look back now and wonder what I might have done if I had been educated in a different way.

As an author, I am frequently asked to speak at homeschool conventions across the country. What question am I asked most frequently? “If I use unit studies, won’t there be holes in my child’s education?” My first response is to ask if they recall ever finishing, COMPLETELY finishing, a textbook during their own education. This really makes people think, and then they usually reply that no, they don’t remember finishing a textbook – there were always chapters left uncovered at the end of the school year.

I remember looking ahead at the chapters at the ends of the books, particularly the science textbook, and getting excited about the material that was coming AFTER we

reviewed the basics, once again. The end chapters held my interest, covering topics like oceans, space exploration, flight, and many other exciting topics that were much more interesting than basic science concepts that we reviewed year after year. I don't recall ever finishing a textbook – ever. I do recall hoping that perhaps the next school year we would pick up where we left off in the textbooks, FINALLY getting to the good stuff, only to be let down again with a new textbook that once again began with the basics.

So, since most of us never finished the bulk of the textbooks used on our own education, do we have “holes” in our own educations? Speaking for myself, yes! I have huge gaps – the equivalent of the Grand Canyon. However, I do know how to find answers, thanks to teaching our own children. I am firmly convinced that teaching our children how to find answers is a vital obligation that we must fulfill in this day of information overload. As the world becomes so interconnected, the abundance of information available to humans is absolutely overwhelming.

I know that it will be impossible to teach them everything that is now known. Knowing this, I have determined that it is much more important to provide an excellent basic education as well as to teach them how to think and find answers. If we just keep trying to cover more and more information with little depth to the information, not firmly grounding any of the information in their minds, then we will not be providing a “good” education. We will become like textbook publishers, who rush to keep adding new information to textbooks, further abridging, condensing and modifying or deleting what they deem less important or not politically correct. Many textbooks now read like encyclopedias, with little interesting reading included, just facts, figures and condensed material. I don't know of many children OR adults that pick up a textbook these days for a “good read.” Do you?

As you choose topics for your unit studies, as well as the direction of the studies, keep a scope and sequence listing on hand to use as a reassurance, a guide, or a check-off sheet. What is a scope and sequence listing? Simply stated, it is a listing, grade by grade, of “typical” material covered in that year of school. Many textbook publishers provide their own scope and sequence listing on their websites. World Book maintains a very detailed scope and sequence (typical course of study) on their website.

If we can teach our children with interesting materials, challenging them to think, reason, analyze and dig deeper for further information, we will find them to be well-educated and ready to move on to a lifetime of challenge and questions and adventure. While we will never be able to teach a child everything, we can certainly teach them these things, providing a strong foundation and knowledge tree that they will utilize for the rest of their lives. Unit studies provide a powerful tool to accomplish this task.

Unit studies teach the student to look at things from all sides, gaining a better and more complete understanding of the topic than if they had learned about it in bits and pieces over twelve years of education. In many textbook scope and sequence listings, you can see how divided up one topic can be over the course of a “standard” education. For

example, the child might learn about sea animals in the third grade, animal classification in the fifth grade, and cells in the seventh grade.

While using a unit study approach over a four week period, your family could learn about sea life and its classifications (both plant and animal), as well as a simple study of plant and animal cells using pond life from a nearby park. The children would get the whole picture at one time, instead of spreading it out in segments over years of learning. With a unit study approach, perhaps you study ocean life as a general topic initially, and in a few months time, return to the topic to study oceans and world geography, and at some time in the future study marine biology in greater depth, adding to the solid tree of knowledge that has been built steadily during the educational process.

From studying shrimp legs and pond life under a microscope to performing surf and tidal wave experiments in the wading pool – lasting memories are being made and a sound information foundation is being laid. Our children became self-motivated key players on the unit study team, asking amazing questions and coming up with ideas all their own. The understanding obtained through unit studies and the hands-on learning process is amazing to me, a first-hand participant in the study. We all learn together. Do you know what Michelangelo said on his 87th birthday? “I am still learning.”

*“When a man's knowledge is not in order, the more of it he has,
the greater will be his confusion”*

Herbert Spencer

Biographical Information

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Amanda Bennett is a homeschool marketing consultant, writer, and homeschool mom. She travels and speaks at conferences and retreats, sharing her faith, homeschool experiences and a contagious love of learning. Her groundbreaking unit studies have become very popular with homeschool families around the world. With two that have graduated from college and one teenager at home, she and her husband stay busy on their tree farm in Tennessee. Visit her websites www.unitstudy.com and www.AmandaBennett.com.