Learning can be much like Odysseus’ journey to Ithaka as described by Cavafy in his 1992 prose, *Ithaka*, full of spectacular adventures, enchantment, and the odd monster or two. Social studies, in particular, offers opportunities for adventures and discoveries, especially when thoughtful planning has been done. In fact, curricular planning can be compared to storing supplies and setting a course to sail through unfamiliar seas; it can reap great rewards for those on the journey. Two of the most important elements are the basic social studies concepts and universal themes that provide a structure for in depth learning. By systematically developing and connecting these components into an integrated structure, the teacher can develop an array of learning experiences that address varied interests, abilities, and levels of challenge of gifted students.
The Approach: Core Concepts

The approach I am about to describe is essentially a humanistic one—more focused on literature, the arts, and philosophy than with the sciences. It is concerned with developing connections among the varied aspects of the human experience as they relate to universal themes and the core concepts of social studies. Gifted students, with their ability for abstract thinking and seeing unusual connections, can profit greatly from such an integrated approach. This type of approach is used because it also gives gifted students opportunities to see how social studies concepts fit into the entirety of human experience, from the arts and literature to politics, government, philosophy, and psychology. It also gives the learner choices within the framework of the area of study. Whether you are a teacher developing a new unit or a coordinator planning a district curriculum, this approach can be invaluable in setting up differentiated high-end learning situations in social studies.

Developing the Structure

The Framework

To begin, consider the social studies concept and the universal theme as two intersecting planes (see Figure 1). The social studies concept may be teacher developed, or based on district, state or national standards. The National Council for the Social Studies (http://www.ncss.org/standards/toc.html) has published *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (1994), which delineates the “10 Thematic Strands in Social Studies.” These strands, used in conjunction with the locally required standards, can help develop an appropriate concept. Whatever the sources, this social studies concept should be broad enough that it can carry a variety of related topics. For example, a concept statement about the importance of revolutions in history is a broad concept. A statement that requires the student to understand the significance of a particular date in a state history sequence is not. In the second example case, lesson extensions would be difficult. In addition, a sequence of broad concepts should be planned to cover a semester or year of study so that concepts flow and build upon each other, increasing student understanding.

The second intersecting plane of the core is a thematic one, which is broader than a particular social studies concept. Themes are universal concepts capable of being utilized in any aspect of human culture. *Power*, for example is a theme that can be used to understand the relationships of countries, armies, and individuals. It also applies to forces of nature, as well as literature and the arts. Other themes (e.g., *change, patterns, systems*) are appropriate, depending on the intended overall concept to be developed. This level of abstraction not only appeals to gifted students, but it is also an important vehicle that enables them to see the connections and relationships among those ideas that are often seen as separate domains. The value of intersecting a universal theme with a social studies concept is the depth of understanding that becomes possible. As students investigate particular aspects of the social studies concept and make connections with the related components, the universal theme provides additional depth and complexity to the experience.

> . . . you’ll never find things like that on your way . . .
> unless you bring them along inside your soul,
> Unless your soul sets them up in

Questions to Ask

Once the social studies concept and the universal theme have been identified, the supporting framework is in place. The process of developing the component parts, like the adventures on the way to Ithaka, can begin. As the teacher looks at ways of developing and extending the core concepts, three questions should be considered:

- What does the student have to know?
- How is this important to the student?
- Where can the concept go from here?

Determine first what the students already know about the concept. What have they been taught before? Has this universal theme been used in the past? What research and presentation skills do the students have? Once the background has been ascertained, then you have to stop and consider just what it is that you feel is essential that they learn from this experience. What are the non-negotiables, those mandated concepts, ideas, and/or topics that must be covered?
Second, as you begin to think about different possibilities, keep in mind student interests. By appealing to student interests, you will have them on your side from the beginning. What are the aspects of the topic that appeal to the interests of students? What existing student interests can be accessed and applied to the concepts being studied?

Finally, once student background knowledge and interests have been considered, the key to the whole process is in deciding how to expand and develop the social studies concept and universal theme. This process should not only develop a number of topics related to the concepts, but also leave open other possibilities. These topics may be the basis for whole class work, group investigations, or independent study projects, depending on the needs and interests of the students and teacher. A web structure is a useful way to begin. In creating the plan, planning or flowchart software, such as Inspiration, may be useful.

Social Studies Concepts

Once the social studies concept has been selected and the depth of previous student knowledge determined, then the topics and subtopics must be developed. The topics should be expanded to cover as many aspects of the human experience as possible. Figure 2 shows the general outline of a web for a social studies concept, but each topic should be expanded more completely. There should be as many choices as possible for groups and individual students. For older students, the topics may be sketched out, but with names, and particulars to be completed after some initial background research. Ideally, there should also be the opportunity for students to develop entirely new areas related to the main topic.

The variety of subtopics is intended to amplify the central topic, while, at the same time, giving students choices that will appeal to individual interests. In groups or as independent study, students...
investigate their chosen topic (for example, new weapons and tactics used in warfare during the French Revolution), completing research in both print and electronic media. Once the research has been completed, students select a means of sharing their information. In doing so, students should strive to create authentic products that reflect the field of learning, as well as the topic at hand.

If the core concept is revolution, for example, interested students could conduct an investigation of art during the French Revolution, how styles and ideas were affected by the cultural changes. To share the results of their investigations, students could present an art exhibition, museum catalog, or prepare a computer presentation, using such programs as HyperStudio™ or PowerPoint™. Students could also impersonate an artist of the time and tell the story with appropriate props and reproductions. The possibilities are as endless as the imagination of the students.

Another related question arises: How was the revolution itself affected by the artistic and literary products of the time? These works are not created in a vacuum and the interaction between the creative products and the society that produced them is well worth investigating. Literature can have what Hans Jauss (1982) calls a socially formative function, meaning that society itself is changed or altered by the challenge to accepted values inherent in a demanding and innovative text (p. 18). By implication, this would also apply to creative works in the visual arts and music. Investigating the impact of a new work within a particular culture gives additional insight into the period.

Individuals, such as Napoleon, have a great impact on the arts, as well as on warfare and government. From the paintings of David and sculptures of Canova, to the novels of Stendhal, and Beethoven’s response to Napoleon’s imperial ambition by removing the dedication to his “Eroica” symphony, the artistic response provides insight for our understanding of the individual, and his impact on the culture.

Connections may also exist between these topics. Scientists or artists may be involved in government. Writers are an important aspect of entertainment and daily life. And just as individuals respond to events in history, so also art may respond to war, housing to technology, and music to literature.

For example, during World War II, the German army, in response to bombs in the occupied Soviet city of Kiev, massacred thousands of citizens, primarily Jews, in a valley called Babi Yar. In 1961, the poet Yvegeny Yevtushenko wrote a poem titled “Babi Yar,” in which he recounts the story in vivid images. Later, the composer Dmitri Shostokovich wrote a symphony of the same title based on Yevtushenko’s poem. Investigating this connection not only gives insight into war atrocities, but also to the Soviet culture in which Yevtushenko and Shostokovich lived. The reverberations from an almost forgotten part of history continue.

The social studies concept acquires even greater depth and meaning when it is connected to a universal theme. Whether a theme is already in place for the unit or semester, or if a theme is developed specifically for this topic, it is an important element that will enable students to reach a more abstract level of thinking. In preparing the thematic portion of the lesson, the teacher may work initially from the theme or backward from the social studies concept to an appropriate theme.

**Universal Themes**

While the social studies concept and the universal theme are intersecting and interacting ideas, the development of learning topics may at times flow more logically when started from the universal theme rather than from the social studies concept. The thematic web (see Figure 3) starts with the selected universal theme and branches out in a number of directions. The main branches (arts, history, literature, philosophy, psychology, and contemporary events) will vary, depending on the theme and the purpose and extent of the area of study. Each of these branches in turn is developed into the components that fit the central theme. In developing each component, ask “How does the theme apply, or what are the examples of this component that focus on this theme?” Under the literature topic, for example, poems, narratives, and dramas should be located that deal with the theme. The same process will be followed for the history, arts, philosophy, psychology, and contemporary events.

This process may be more or less difficult, depending not only on the theme itself, but also on the background and expertise of planner. Therefore, this level of the development process might be best completed by a team of people, each with their own individual knowledge and information.

Sometimes a particular work of art may be a powerful example of the theme (Escher’s works for the theme of pattern), but there may be less clear connections in literature or philosophy. The history branch of the web has divisions for concepts, movements, and individuals, but other ideas may apply to partic-
ular themes. The concept of revolution, for example, could be included in the theme of power, but so could concepts of migration and colonialism. The branch labeled contemporary events includes an array of political, social, and media ideas and people. As the web develops, connections between different components may become obvious, lending greater depth to the theme.

The topics developed in the thematic web can form the teacher-directed portion of the lesson, the introduction to theme with its implications across the humanistic spectrum. Using a thematic “hook” to introduce the theme/concepts is an effective opening. In the lesson, the introduction or motivation segment stimulates student interest through a problem, a puzzlement, something unfamiliar or builds on current events and/or personal experience (Kaplan & Cannon, 2000). After developing the thematic web, the teacher has a variety of possibilities that may attract students to the theme/concept. These could be used alone or in a series to reinforce the different facets of the central theme.

The theme of power, for example, leads to the historical concept of revolution, but it also has other connections and examples that can be developed in the arts, literature, psychology, philosophy, and contemporary events. Also to be determined is exactly what aspect of power will be considered: use/abuse of power, resistance to power, conflicting sources of power, effects of power, power as a descriptor (e.g., powerful music, art), and powerful individuals. The idea of the abuse of power has many applications that will reinforce and add depth to the concept of revolution at the next level. Figure 4 shows a few possibilities of texts that explore this concept in literature.

**Figure 3**
The Thematic Web

<table>
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<th>Universal Theme</th>
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<td>Contemporary Events</td>
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<td>History</td>
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<td>Philosophy</td>
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<td>Arts</td>
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**Viva La Revolución!: A Concept/Thematic Lesson**

This sample lesson has been used for several years with middle school humanities classes of identified gifted and talented students in a large urban school district. With some adjustments, it has also been used with upper elementary and secondary classes.

The theme is power with the concept of revolution providing numerous opportunities to prove these generalizations:

- Power can have different types of consequences;
- Power exerts positive and negative influences;
- Power can be controlled or controlling; and
- Power can be constructive or destructive.
To motivate students for the topic, post the following quotation from Napoleon Bonaparte: “There are two levers for moving men—interest and fear.” Discuss the basic ideas (including what a lever is and how it works). Solicit examples of how someone might be moved by interest or fear. Consider the following: Which is most effective? Most long lasting? Morally questionable? Justified?

Write the word “Revolution” on the board and get student definitions. Post the definitions as given and use as the basis of further discussion. Together develop an acceptable definition, being sure to include the concept of overthrow of one government or ruler and the substitution of another.

With student input, list examples of historical revolutions. The list could include American, French, Mexican, Russian, Texas, India, Irish among others. If the definition is broadened, then the Industrial Revolution can be included, along with the communication/computer revolution of the late 20th century.

Once a list of revolutions has been developed, revolution becomes the responsibility of one group of students. They must investigate several aspects of the event, organize their information, tie it to the theme and generalizations, and then report their findings to the class in a meaningful form. Each group works from a chart like the one in Figure 2, dividing the research responsibilities among the group members. The older and more capable the students, the more depth required in each step of the research process. Quotations, samples of art and music, and detailed descriptions of each aspect are expected.

The group products can take a variety of forms. For younger students, a Fact Sheet (10–15 statements) that lists the most important information may be a sufficient summary. They could also be required to create a poster illustrating important people and events, maps of battles and geographic changes, excerpts from literary works, examples of artistic creations, or present a well-researched debate between representatives of each side of the revolution.

After the research phase, secondary students could be required to prepare a written report covering the revolution. The presentation to the class could be in a number of forms, including, but not limited to: diaries, newscasts, models, dioramas, dramatizations, comic books, and talk shows.

The conclusion of the lesson can take a number of forms, but it is essential that students have the opportunity to synthesize the various aspects of the concept of revolution as they occur in historical and social events and to note the applicability of the generalizations of power in each. Discussions, essays, and visual responses are possible culminating events.

### Conclusion

While it is demanding and time consuming to construct intersecting webs of universal themes and social studies concepts, the results are worth the effort. This kind of framework provides gifted learners with a challenging variety of learning experiences that appeal to a wide range of interests and abilities. And these learning adventures will guide the students to the “Ithaka” of our educational journey, a deeper and more complex understanding of human experience across time, and

> . . . Arriving there is what you are destined for.  
> But do not hurry the journey at all.  
> Better if it lasts for years . . . .  
> (Cavafy, 1992) ὅτε

### References


