



Planning for What You Can't Know





I Can't Know But I Can Project: Planning Units of Study in the Writing Workshop

By Matt Glover and Mary Alice Berry

When my son Harrison was about two years old, he would often answer questions with the reply “I can’t know.” Not I “don’t” know, but I “can’t” know. For example if I asked, “Harrison, why did you hit your sister?” Harrison would look at me and in all sincerity say, “I can’t know.” It was as if he were saying, “Gosh Dad, I’d really like to help you out, but since I’m only two I can’t possibly begin to know the answer to that. It’s beyond my comprehension. I can’t know.”

Over the years, my wife and I would turn to each other when faced with difficult questions about finances or being a parent and borrow Harrison’s reply of, “I can’t know.” Of course Harrison’s answer was more of a result of his beginning language use than truly articulating the difference between “can’t know” and “don’t know.” But the idea of “I can’t know” has stuck with me, especially when it comes to teaching and fostering meaningful experiences for students.

I can’t know comes into play when planning units of instruction in any area and particularly in planning units of study in writing workshop. When teachers plan for what they will be doing on day 13 of a unit of study, they can’t know what they will be doing on that day if they are truly listening to students and reacting to what they are doing. It’s not accurate to say that we don’t know. That implies that we could know. Instead, teachers can’t know, because what will happen on day 13 is dependent on what happens each of the 12 days leading up to it.

This sense of not knowing can be difficult for teachers. And simply saying “It’s ok, you can’t know” isn’t actually very helpful either. Fortunately, it is possible to project possible scenarios for what I will be doing on day 13. When I go through the process of projecting how

this unit could unfold, it’s much more likely that all of my teaching leading up to day 13 will be more thoughtful, more intentional, and more meaningful.

We want to share a process for planning for, or projecting, units of study in a writing workshop that can help teaching become easier and more powerful.

Why Project Units of Study

There are some particular advantages to projecting ahead in a unit of study in writing workshop. When teachers project ahead:

- They consider everything that may be taught in a particular unit of study. We often hear from teachers that they want to teach a unit but don’t know what to teach. When teachers project ahead in a unit of study they determine all of the topics that could be taught in this unit. This provides the teacher with a large pool of possible minilesson teaching points. During this process the teacher considers more possibilities than she will have time to teach, but by considering all of the possibilities, she is more able to make changes based on what arises during the unit.
- They determine the most important things to teach in this unit. When teachers project and consider the entire range of possible teaching points, they can then determine which teaching points are the most important ones to teaching during minilessons. Since everything can’t be taught in this unit, it is important to focus on the most important teaching points.
- They consider which minilesson points go together and what order they should go in. When teachers project out a sequence of minilessons



they determine which topics should be taught together and which topics should be taught before other topics. This makes the teaching more connected and coherent for students.

- Deciding on teaching points during writing conferences becomes easier. Since the teacher has already determined a large number of possible teaching points as well as which ones are most important, they now have a pool of possible teaching points for their writing conferences. They have these possibilities at their fingertips, which is particularly important given the in-the-moment, responsive nature of writing conferences. Teachers have to think and decide quickly in a conference, so it's more efficient if they've already considered what all could be taught. By thinking through a unit ahead of time, the teacher is more focused in the writing conference.

All of these benefits don't mean we're limited in what could be taught. The teacher is going to decide on teaching points for minilessons based on what will be the most helpful at the time. On any day a teacher might think of a new teaching point and will add that to their pool. Projecting a unit doesn't limit, but it does provide the teacher with a framework from which to start.

Finally, it is important to note that there is always an unknown aspect to what could be taught in a unit since we are going to engage students in a process of inquiry during this unit. While we are going to project out what could be taught, students and teachers are going to study a stack of real world texts that support the particular unit, and together notice the decisions that authors have made to create these texts. So as much as we want to know what all we will teach, we won't truly know until we start the unit by studying texts alongside our students and seeing what they discover.

A Process for Projecting

If teachers are going to project units of study, having a set process makes it easier. If a teacher has a process that works to plan out one unit, then she is able to plan out any unit. The following is a brief overview of a process for projecting out a unit of study.

1. Gathering and studying a stack of mentor texts

For most units, the projecting process starts with sitting down with a stack of real-world mentor texts and reading them like a teacher of writing. As she reads, the teacher starts making a list of all of the possible things that could be taught in this unit. As the teacher notices a decision that an author made in a text, she adds it to the list. During this phase she writes down everything that she thinks she might teach without yet determining if she would actually teach it or not. For now, we just want to look at possibilities.

When the teacher is finished studying these texts she should have a pretty good list of teaching possibilities. The teacher could expand her knowledge by reading what literacy experts say could be taught in this unit. There are numerous resources that could be helpful in considering what all could be taught. And of course, this list will change once we start studying the real texts with students.

2. Determining Essential Goals

Once the teacher has a good understanding of what could be taught in this unit she's ready to determine a few "Essential Goals." Essential Goals describe the one to three overarching goals for this unit. Essential Goals describe really big things the teacher wants students to know and be able to do at the end of the unit that they can't do now. Most of the mini lessons and student conferences build toward these Essential Goals. For example, in a 2nd grade unit on Literary Nonfiction, an Essential Goal could be "Students will write books that strongly engage their reader while teaching them about a topic." Most of the minilessons would be building toward that goal.

3. Determining Secondary Goals

After determining several Essential Goals, the teacher determines four to eight Secondary Goals. These goals are more specific than the Essential Goals, and often describe what a chunk of minilesson topics will focus on. Most units will have Secondary Goals that focus on the quality of the writing, the process of writing, revision and conventions.

4. Developing a Sequence of Minilessons

Once Essential and Secondary Goals are set, the teacher starts to list out a possible sequence of minilessons that will build toward these goals. She starts with listing all of the things that could be taught in this unit, which will likely require many more days than are available. After all of the possibilities are laid out she does three things:

- She determines which things are the most important to teach during minilessons. The other items don't go into the projected sequence of lessons, but they aren't forgotten either. At any point they might be needed for a minilesson or in a conference.
- She determines which things would make sense to be taught together and groups them into chunks.
- She determines which chunks need to come before other lessons, thereby laying out the projected order of lesson topics.

Again, this is only a projection, and will likely not be how the lessons ultimately unfold once students start studying the stack of texts.

5. Anticipating Issues and Possible Small Group Conferences

While the teacher is determining possible mini lesson topics it's likely that she will encounter some topics that she thinks may or may not need to be taught. There will also be some topics that she anticipates only a few students will need and therefore wouldn't be taught in a minilesson. These items go into a parking lot of sorts of issues, and possible small group conferences, so that they aren't forgotten.

6. Materials and Resources

The teacher will also write down the materials and resources she will need in this unit. Most important will be the narrowed down list of mentor texts that the teacher and students will study in depth.

After Projecting

Of course, once the unit begins all of this changes. Once we start studying texts with students, they will notice new ideas that could be taught that we hadn't anticipated. The teacher will likely notice some new possibilities too. And of course, the unit will really change from mini lesson to minilesson when we learn that some items will take longer to teach with this particular class and that other topics will be learned much more quickly than we anticipated. The whole unit will unfold based on what happens each day and our daily reflections on what transpired. If we are truly listening to and responding to students, then these types of changes aren't just anticipated, they are valued and desired.

A teacher could ask "Why project out a unit if everything is just going to change? Why not save time and just figure it out as we go?" The answer of course is that when we project a unit, we consider all of the possibilities, all of the things that might happen, all of the things that we could teach. When we spend time projecting how a unit could unfold, we are ensuring that we are prepared to respond thoughtfully to the numerous opportunities to make decisions that comprise the

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world of teaching. Teaching is the act of making hundreds of decisions each day, and when we are well prepared, we make better decisions. By projecting units of study for writing we are ensuring that our teaching, and student learning, will be more meaningful, powerful, and lasting.

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To continue to engage with Matt and Mary Alice on this topic go to www.Heinemann.com/pd/journal.

