

Using Themes to Capture Student Interest

By Sandra H. Harwell, Ph.D.

Vice President of Curriculum and Professional Development, CORD

It happened quite by accident one day. I was ready to explain to a group of uninterested high school students about the importance of dealing with change and conflict. As I looked around the room, I realized that, unless I could capture their interest, what I had to say would be lost in a cacophony of other important information they were hearing from other passionate teachers trying to help them recognize the importance of filing information away until an opportunity to use it presents itself. We as teachers mean well, but we have little opportunity to find creative ways to help students file away important information, sorting it from the trivia they also receive from us. To think that they will be able to access it later in life is ludicrous.

I had been to a bookstore a few days prior and had purchased a wonderful children's book for my youngest son. I was so enthralled by the book I brought it to school to show some of my colleagues. The title of the book was, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day!* by Judith Viorst. The story is a funny description of a bad day by a young child. It was so cleverly written, every student could identify with one of Alexander's experiences. I decided to use it to preface the lesson I had planned for the day. You might think that high school students would never respond to having a children's book read to them—think again! They not only responded, they were totally enraptured. For most of the students, from that day until they graduated, they would come by my room and say, "Mrs. Harwell, I'm having one of those terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days." What was so amazing to me was how long they remembered the strategies I had shared in the lesson regarding ways to deal with conflict.

To say that this experience changed my beliefs about teaching is to make light of the impact on my teaching career. I realized that Caine and Caine (1991) were right. We have to help students see patterns, form pathways for recall, and respond to new information using emotions and prior learning and experience. From that day on, I tried to find connections for the students to use to form pathways for recall for critical knowledge and skills. I have used metaphors from movies the students are particularly fond of, stories from classic collections, excerpts from songs, and so on. If I think of a way to use something I experience, I write it down on a notepad and review my notepad before designing a lesson. Many times, I can do an Internet search of a movie, book, story, or song, and find that other creative teachers have posted lessons they have created using the same metaphor or idea. A great example is, "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz." It's amazing how many creative ideas there are for using the story as a metaphor or as a way of capturing student interest in literature. I've also used it to create teacher workshops on change.

How does this fit contextual teaching? To teach a new concept in the context of something that will create a pathway for recall is a way to ensure students will retain what you are teaching. Context can be more than the workplace, the school, or interest. Context can be anything that helps students learn beyond rote memorization. No one ever forgets the A, B, C song. Why? The alphabet was learned in the context of music.

Many of us have ways to quickly remember how many days are in each month because of a mnemonic we were taught or by using the knuckles and valleys on our hand. Learning in context to form pathways for recall is a key to lifelong learning.

As a teacher, allow yourself the luxury of brainstorming themes that you can use to present new, critical content in a context that will lead to long-term recall for your students. It really works. You will seldom have a “terrible, horrible, very bad day” teaching when you use themes as a context for learning.

References

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Viorst, J. (1972). Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day. Kingsport, TN: Kingsport Press.