

How to Introduce Units of Study and Set Your Students on Fire for Learning

There exists an amazing strategy that will dramatically increase student interest, motivation, and comprehension in virtually *whatever* you're studying. It's so remarkable, in fact, that it will pull your students deeper into your topic than any other single strategy. It will cause them to sit up bright and tall in their seats and capture everything you teach them—even the smallest details. (Especially the smallest details.)

In just a half hour or less your students will learn more than they normally would in two weeks of following a paint-by-numbers curriculum, and it will prompt an enthusiastic desire to learn more and more and more.

The strategy is best employed at the beginning of a unit of study. The way it works is that instead of giving your students a preview of what they're about to learn, instead of reading an introduction or teaching a more traditional first lesson . . . you will tell a story.

From start to finish you will walk your students through the key moments, events, and history of your topic—or the history behind your topic—all in the form of a narrative?

It's important to note that as you're doing your prep work, you must look for the humanity in your topic—the characters, the dramatic tension, the obstacles, the setbacks and victories. If it has been deemed important

enough to be part of your curriculum, then in all likelihood it will contain these remarkable themes, as well as many others.

The best way to begin is to stand silently in front of your students. Before saying a word, take a lengthy pause for effect, letting curiosity peak. Don't write the name of the unit on an easel or whiteboard. Don't show any videos or pictures or artifacts. Don't even tell them what you're about to do. Simply take a deep breath and begin.

“There once was a man named Howard Carter who spent six years searching for the lost tomb of a boy king.”

Now, granted, few stories are as compelling as Tutankhamen, but I think you'll discover that regardless of the topic, you'll find more than enough drama and intrigue to enchant your students.

The discovery of King Tut's tomb may only be one small part of your study of Ancient Egypt, for example, but the key is to weave the important background, vocabulary, history, and lifestyle of the people into the story. *Everything* has a story. Once you find it, you can increase learning in your classroom tenfold.

Here are a few more helpful hints:

Stay in storytelling mode.

Be careful not to get sidetracked writing out lists of facts or key points for your students. You can still include them, but make sure they're within the context of the greater story. The idea is to entice your students to follow you deep into a new and wondrous world they may know little about.

Act it out.

Capture the drama of the story by mimicking character movements and impersonating voices and facial expressions. Acting out key scenes rather than just narrating them will *immerse* your students into your new unit of study. So much so that when you finish, they'll be clamoring for more.

Be yourself.

Uncertainty over how you'll do or how the story will turn out is normal. Just be yourself and focus on giving your students a great story, and you can't mess it up. Once the room falls silent and you get into a flow, you'll have just about the best time teaching you've ever had.

Be creative.

Some subjects and units of study may lend themselves to storytelling better than others, but that doesn't mean it isn't doable. In fact, telling a story about a famous writer, mathematician, or scientist can bring dry and dusty topics to life for your students.

Note: Not every story has to be true. "I bumped into Iron Man at the grocery store yesterday, and I asked him about gravity and how he was able to fly. So he showed me."

Storytelling Fits Any Curriculum

Storytelling is the most flexible and dynamic medium available to teachers, and it will fit seamlessly into whatever standards or curriculum you've been asked to follow—Common Core or otherwise. Simply put, it's a surefire way to get your students excited about *whatever* you're learning.

It will deepen their understanding, provide a much needed and often-overlooked scaffold of big-picture

context, and motivate them to want to learn and experience more about your topic. During your morning preview, you may even get a cheer when you mention the start of a new unit.

Storytelling will also add another layer to your goal of creating a classroom your students love being part of. And as you grow more comfortable using it to introduce units of study, you'll notice them becoming so emotionally invested that subsequent lessons become much easier to deliver.

