Planning Project Units

Projects, like good stories, have a beginning, middle, and end. This temporal structure helps teachers align the progression of activities with the development of students' interests and personal involvement with the topic of study. This structure also helps teachers integrate and meet curricula benchmarks—a crucial part of the process.

First Steps

During the preliminary planning stage, teachers select a topic of study based on students' interests, the curriculum, and the availability of local resources. Teachers also brainstorm (and represent) their own experience with and knowledge and ideas about the topic in a web. This web becomes a central part of the project process, with teachers—and students—using it to record the progress of their work.

Phase 1: Beginning the Project

Using the EKWQ framework, teachers discuss the topic with students to find out about their related experiences and pre-existing knowledge. Often, this process evolves over a few days, with teachers eliciting prior knowledge through the use of related stories, discussions, journals, or other activities. Students then represent their experiences and show their understanding of the concepts involved in explaining them. Teachers help students develop questions to pursue during their investigation; they also send a letter about the study home to parents, who are encouraged to speak with their children about the topic and to share any relevant personal experience of their own.

Phase 2: Developing the Project

Opportunities for students to conduct field work and to speak with experts are arranged. Teachers provide resources to help students with their investigations, such as authentic objects, books, magazines, newspapers, music, Web sites, and other research materials. Teachers then suggest ways for students to carry out their investigations. Meanwhile, each student is involved in representing what he or she is learning in a variety of ways; with younger children, this may take the form of basic skills, such as 3D constructions, drawing, music, or dramatic play, and with older children, this could include journaling, editing magazines, dramatic performance, experimental design, robots, web site development, videos, presentations, comic books, and more.

Throughout the process, teachers use group discussions and displays to enable students to take note of the diverse range of work. The topic web designed earlier provides a shorthand means of documenting the many branches of the project.

Phase 3: Concluding the Project

Teachers arrange a culminating event through which students share what they've learned with others (parents, administrators, other classes, experts). Students spend several days preparing for the event and selecting appropriate materials and displays. Teachers help students in this planning process, and, in doing so, involve them purposefully in reviewing and evaluating the whole project. Teachers also offer students imaginative ways of personalizing their new knowledge through art, stories, and drama. Finally, teachers use the students' ideas and interests to make a meaningful transition between the concluding project and the topic of study in the next project.

EKWQ - Experience, Knowledge, Wonder and asking Questions

A Framework to Start the Project Process

Builds on student experience to generate authentic student interest in a topic, shared knowledge, and practice in exploring the known parts of a topic before tackling the unknowns.

Strategy	Teacher's Role	Students	Examples: what students do
Experience	***Ethnographer*** – learn what students already know through observation	Share & represent existing experiences with topic.	Tell stories, write, draw, make paintings and collages, make clay models, construct with blocks, role play, etc.
Knowledge	***Support*** student activities and encourage deeper explanations.	Deepen prior knowledge and develop expertise	Interview/survey each other, take notes, collect data. Represent the collected research in charts and graphs. Develop theories.
Wondering	***Coordinate*** work to develop collective understandings and research process	Learn what other students know and explore differences.	Share expertise. Draw conclusions and explore areas of interest, unknowns, and curiosity.
Ask Questions	***Articulate*** - Help students turn "wonders" into driving questions	Develop driving questions for projects.	Create lists of questions. Brainstorm ideas, consolidate, and

Note: KWL (a popular instructional planning tool used to create charts of "what we Know", "what we Want to know", and "what we Learned") may sound similar. However, KWL was designed for instruction centered on reading of texts and is not enough for a project. KWL can even inhibit the development of interest, which is built to last in the EKWQ framework.