

Units of Study for Teaching Reading: A Series Overview

**A transcript of remarks by Lucy Calkins
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Teacher's Guide

I'm excited to be able to tell you about Units of Study in Teaching Reading and to walk you through all that's there for you. The first thing is a book called "A Guide to Reading Workshop", an overview of the reading workshop. It describes the essential methods that will inform your teaching. In this guide to the reading workshop, there is a chapter on conferring and small group work to support readers. There's a chapter on assessing readers and tracking their development and using data to inform your instruction. There's a chapter on the methods that are important to leading effective minilessons that explains how you can explicitly teach the skills of powerful reading. There are chapters on the skills of powerful reading that identify what it is that proficient readers do that we need to be able to teach all kids. All of the other main questions that you'll ask about methods of teaching reading are there in the guidebook, including what do I do to support struggling readers. The guidebook is deliberately lean and meant not to overwhelm you but to enable you to get the essence of all of these methods and this content, because in fact, the unit books themselves illustrate them. So, there's the guide and then there are four units of study books.

Unit of Study Book 1

If you know the series The Units of Study in Teaching Writing, the Units of Study in Teaching Reading are patterned exactly after the units in writing. The first unit is a book which really helps you to launch the reading workshop and to teach readers those essential skills that are so foundational that you really need to address them in September. The first book teaches readers how to read with stamina, how to monitor for sense, how to do the kind of retelling that shows a basic level comprehension. It helps you to assess all your readers, to match them to books, to teach them the rituals of taking books between home and school, of keeping logs of their reading. All of that is contained in book one. But I think the challenge of book one is that there's a lot of really essential work that you as a teacher have to accomplish. Of course, you want to do it in a way that inspires kids and makes them see themselves as readers. You want them to feel that they are authoring lives as readers and that their whole community of practice this year is going to be different than any other year. This year, reading may in fact be the best thing that they've ever done. This book has a whole lot of very practical work in terms of helping you with classroom management and getting your methods going: getting the kids assessed, getting all of them going on their trajectory as readers, and then it also does this inspirational work.

Unit of Study Book 2

The next unit of study book is a book on character. And of course character is one of the most important things for a reader of a fiction text to be thinking about. All of us when we read fiction are thinking about character. So it's a book on character, but, for you as a teacher, what you know is that you're really following character into higher level comprehension. That's really what this second book is about. Specifically, you'll see that it helps you to teach three different main reading skills. First of all, it helps you to teach envisionment, and as sort of an extension of envisionment, prediction. What I have come to believe is that so often we think that some kids are born as readers. Those are the kids that are sort of nose-in-the-book readers and you can't take them away from books. As teachers, we sometimes think that that's in their DNA or something, that they just come to us that way. What this book sets out to do is to help you as a teacher challenge that notion, that some kids are born readers and some aren't, so that you can do everything you possibly can to help all of your readers be nose-in-the-book readers, who read, envisioning and on the edge of their seat predicting. The other thing that it does is take envisionment and prediction and talk about these as skills that unroll across a trajectory. There are ways of being a novice predictor, an intermediate predictor, and an advanced predictor. You'll see prediction and envisionment concretely laid out so that you have a sense of what are the real specifics that you can be teaching to move kids from where they are to where you want to take them. So the first half of the character book begins with teaching envisionment and prediction. And then the book makes a real turn and tackles, instead of nose-in-the-book reading, kind of lost-in-the-story reading; it aims to help readers grow theories as they read. You could almost say that the second half teaches how to read a little bit like a professor with literary theories that you

can support with evidence. It's helpful to think about that as teaching readers to have a different kind of relationship to characters. So in the first half of the book, they almost are the characters. In the second half, it's a more expository relationship to characters where they're looking at characters and thinking, "What kind of person is this? What are the character's traits? What are my theories for the character? What is my evidence for those theories?" All of that work is supported in the second book.

Unit of Study Book 3

The third unit is a book on navigating nonfiction. It's hard to choose a favorite book, like it's hard to choose a favorite son, but at least at this moment, it may be my favorite because I think it does such important work on the entire field of thinking about nonfiction reading. Essentially, what Kathleen and I try to do in this book is to help readers read nonfiction. I argue that a lot of times our instruction in nonfiction has helped readers generate some questions and shown them how to open up a nonfiction book so that they can skim and scan it to find answers to questions. Although I think that kind of nonfiction reading is really important, we also need to teach kids to read nonfiction; to give themselves over to a nonfiction text and to comprehend it. To take in what a nonfiction author has said in its entirety, not just finding cool facts. Instead of, "When the Egyptians built the pyramids they didn't wear underwear. Isn't that cool?", we want them to comprehend the main ideas that an author's putting forth. So the book on nonfiction forwards the role of structure and suggests that when we're reading nonfiction texts that are organized as expository texts, we need to be able to use the expository structure to help us to find big ideas, to find the specifics that support big ideas. And that when we're reading narrative nonfiction, or nonfiction that's written like a story, as for example biography is, that we can actually bring all that we know from reading stories, to bear on reading that kind of nonfiction. We can read it in a way where we synthesize the whole text by bringing that structure to bear on it.

Unit of Study Book 4

Then the fourth book, the last of the units of study books, is a book on reading historic fiction and doing so in book clubs. The kids will think of it as a book on reading historic fiction, and you will as well, but the real work of this book is that it's teaching you to help kids tackle more complex texts and to read with higher level comprehension. In fact, the main skill work in this last book in the series is that of teaching interpretation and critical reading. And with it, teaching kids to write about their reading. So the historic fiction book has a lot of work to do, because it's teaching kids to tackle more complex texts, to read with a more literary consciousness. To take their skills and ratchet them up even higher, to specifically read, thinking, "What is this text really about?", to try to figure out what the theme is in a text, and to be able to talk and write about that in ways that are powerful and compelling. All of this is done while the kids are working not with partners, which is the social structure that supports the first three books, but instead in book clubs, where four kids are reading shared books. And, of course, the nonfiction book has added power because it helps students think about nonfiction in relation to historic fiction. So that kids are also learning that you not only read a couple historic fiction books that are set in a particular era, and think across and among those books, but also bring in nonfiction texts that relate to those books. The other work of this unit is helping with this intertextuality, looking across books including both fiction and nonfiction texts. Those are the main elements in the units of study series.

Resources for Teaching Reading CD-ROM

Those of you who know the CD-ROM full of resource materials in writing won't be surprised that there's resource materials in reading as well. But this time we really felt, because of having listened to teachers and their requests, that we needed to provide extra resources.

Alternative Units of Study

So we've got a whole other book which is designed to help teachers tailor their teaching to kids. This book supports teachers in developing alternate units of study. It lays out in a slightly more abbreviated form, but still with all the minilessons there, four or five other units and then in yet more abbreviated form, another half dozen units. This final book is one that helps you not just have minilessons that you can draw on as you author your own curriculum, but also whole units of study that you can draw on as you author curriculum in response to your kids and in conversation with your colleagues.