Developing Units of Study

Definition: Units represent a coherent chunk of work in courses or strands, across days or weeks. An example is a unit on natural habitats and adaptation that falls under the yearlong strand of living things (the course), under 3rd grade science (the subject), and under science (the program). (Wiggins)

Though no hard and fast criteria signify what a unit is, educators generally think of a unit as a body of subject matter that is somewhere in length between a lesson and an entire course of study; that focuses on a major topic (e.g., Revolutionary War) or process (e.g., research process); and that lasts between a few days and a few weeks (Wiggins).

The Writing Process

A goal for writing the *Montana Guide to Model Curriculum Development* was to provide an organizational framework that would lead students and teachers to deeper conceptual understandings.

- In writing units of study, first, macro-concepts and generalizations were identified. Overarching concepts such as systems, patterns, change, and cause and effect--which represent the big ideas of the entire curriculum model--provide a structure for students to make sense of ideas over time and across disciplines.
- Then, unifying concepts related to each unit of study were selected.
- Finally, following the lead of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (Wiggins), those ideas were written as essential questions and enduring understandings and connected to the standards, benchmarks, and essential learning expectations (ELEs) already defined in the Montana Content Standards Framework. The Units of Study address learning progressions (ELE) that ensure student understanding rather than coverage of content.
- Once enduring understandings and essential questions are defined, assessments are created and classroom activities are planned to specifically address the desired learner outcomes.
- Preconceptions and misconceptions that students may possess about the representative topic have been identified in order to help structure the kinds of learning opportunities that would help develop the conceptual understandings of the discipline.

The Template

The Units of Study template, based on the work of Wiggins & McTighe, as well as input from Montana educators from K-12 and post-secondary schools, was created to reflect this process and to structure the writing of additional units of study. The template also includes the language of the standards, instructional guidance and ideas for authentic and purposeful assessment.

Description of Parts of the Unit of Study Template

Unit of Study: (Title)

Grade:

Suggested Timeframe:

Unifying Concepts: Core concepts, principles, theories, and processes that serve as the focal point of curricula, instruction, and assessment.

Enduring Understandings: Enduring understandings are statements summarizing important ideas and core processes that are central to a discipline and have lasting value beyond the classroom. They synthesize what students should understand—not just know or do—as a result of studying a particular content area. Moreover, they articulate what students should "revisit" over the course of their lifetimes in relationship to the content area.

Essential Questions: The overarching and recursive nature of essential questions makes them ideally suited to framing the macro curriculum of programs and courses. By their nature, essential questions focus on big ideas that are typically not unit-specific. They can only be properly addressed across many units and, in some cases, years of study. Practically speaking essential questions can be used to provide the backbone of courses and programs into which individual units fit.

Content Standards, Benchmarks, and Essential Learning Expectations: Rather than an extensive laundry list, the selected Standards, Benchmarks and ELE's for the unit should represent the skills and knowledge that students should acquire during this particular unit.

Assessment: An assessment composed of performance tasks and activities designed to simulate or replicate important real-world challenges. The heart of authentic assessment is realistic performance-based testing that asks the student to use knowledge in real-world ways, with genuine purposes, audiences, and situational variables.

Language of the Standards: vocabulary from the ELE and other related vocabulary that will appear in assessments and other necessary language of the unit.

Additional Information: content specific information to guide instruction including lesson sequence, activities, common student misconceptions, resources, etc.)

Cross-Curricular Content Standards, Benchmarks, and Essential Learning Expectations: strategically selected standards, benchmarks and ELE from other content areas that will be practiced and assessed in the unit of study.

Montana Model Curriculum Framework			
Unit of Study (content based statement not title)		**Grade**	**Suggested Timeframe:** (minimum of 2 weeks – total for all units in a given year must fit within a year)
Unifying Concepts			
Enduring Understandings	**Essential Questions**	**Content Standards, Benchmarks, and Essential Learning Expectations**	
Assessments (listing of formative to summative including Performance Rubrics, CRT released items)			
Language of the Standards (vocabulary from ELE list of essential vocabulary plus other necessary language for the unit)			
Additional Information (content specific tips, e.g., common misconceptions, common errors, resources, additional information to assist educator)			
Cross-Curricular Content Standards, Benchmarks, and Essential Learning Expectations			

Reflection: The following questions may help guide the writing of the units especially the formation of concepts, Enduring Understandings and Essential Questions.

- *What is it about the topic that is so important?"*
- *Is it the topic that is important? Or is it something more fundamental and dynamic about the topic that my students should really understand?*
- *What are important observable phenomena that students will need to interpret or explain?*

- *How might we represent a model that organizes and helps us make sense of the big idea?*
- *How can the big idea be made relevant to kids' interests and lives?* (National Science Foundation, University of Washington School of Education)

Works Cited

ASCD. "Research a Topic: Understanding by Design." 2011. ASCD. 21 March 2011 <http://www.ascd.org/research-a-topic/understanding-by-design-resources.aspx>.

National Science Foundation, University of Washington School of Education. Big Idea Tool. 2011. 15 March 2011 <http://tools4teachingscience.org/tools/big_idea.html>.

Wiggins, Grant and McTighe, Jay. Understanding by Design. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005.