

UNIT STUDIES
A NATURAL FOR HOME-EDUCATION

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For home-educators, this is the season for evaluating what we have done so far, re-visiting our long-term goals, objectives and desires, making adjustments as needed, and then energetically setting the direction for next year. These are rather reflective activities that are both necessary and beneficial to our long-term success. It is so easy for us to be distracted by the pace of day-to-day activities; so easy, in fact, that we need to set aside specific time to re-focus on the big picture, regularly. Whether you are wrapping up your studies for this year and pondering what to do next year, or in the midst of making a decision to homeschool, I have a few thoughts and challenges to share with you.

Our desire to provide a nurturing environment for our children is what initially draws many of us to consider homeschooling. We imagine our cozy little family doing stuff together, laughing and smiling, happily loving school and enjoying each other. It should work, considering that home is *the place* where parents prepare children for life, and education is the *instruction, learning and training*, which prepares children for life; in theory one plus the other should equal home-education. But how, in practical terms, do we make our homes the joyful, unique centres for growing and learning that we envisioned?

Most of us start homeschooling our children with only our own public or private school experience to work from. We are personally familiar with traditional classrooms where there is predominantly one-sided presentations from the teacher to students, subjects taught in isolation from each other and one at a time, stacks of textbooks and workbooks, set schedules, tests, and uniform grade levels. Since our experience is also our comfort zone (whether or not we actually enjoyed it), when we start homeschooling, we often simply recreate school at home by superimposing the traditional picture of school over our cozy picture of home, using many of the same methods and resources that traditional classrooms use. This can result in a muddled or confused picture as we try to combine two pictures – or philosophies - into one, and the outcome may not satisfy our initial goals for home-education. It can be difficult to sort through the conflicting ideas, but as we learn that it is not necessary for our homeschool to conform to the conventional school model – that we do not need to imitate classroom methodologies – we will begin to establish our own philosophy of education and to look for more effective, home-friendly methods of teaching our children. I found Unit Style teaching to “fit the bill,” providing both a workable structure and the flexibility to create an enjoyable family learning environment for both myself, and my children.

I would boldly say that good unit style teaching provides the very best opportunity to take advantage of educating your children at home. I am persuaded that unit studies can be the vehicle that shifts your mindset from the rigid pattern of “school at home” to the richness of “home schooling.” This is a paradigm shift; a basic change in how you view

the teaching of children, from the controlled, fixedness of conventional classrooms and curriculum, to developing a more natural, joyful, holistic, life-style approach to education in your home.

Let me suggest to you a first understanding in this paradigm shift: **unit studies can provide you with the opportunity to go from the formal classroom model (teacher presenting information to student in desk, or student reading information from textbook), to multi-sensory interactive learning which involves the whole child, allows plenty of opportunity for experiential learning and for making discoveries.**

The unit style teacher facilitates this interactive learning through activity-based instruction, continually balancing a flow of information with a flow of thought-stirring questions, and then allowing time for the students to discover answers for the questions.

Webster's dictionary defines learning as involving three parts: (1) knowledge received by instruction or study; (2) knowledge acquired by experience, experiment, or observation; and (3) skill in anything good or bad. From the definition, each of these three appear to be equally valid. However, "instruction or study" is what we emphasize when we think "school", usually neglecting the other components of learning or relegating them to "extracurricular".

Interactive unit study teaching incorporates, takes advantage of and deliberately sets up the experiential dimension of learning – this approach lets children *do* stuff instead of merely *telling* them about the stuff. For example, when studying plants unit style, we (parent-teacher and students) would go outdoors and dig up as many different kinds of weeds or plants as we could find, use a magnifying glass to examine the intricate leaf patterns and veins, feel the various textures, compare the root systems and flowers if any are present. We would have books about plants from the library so we could diagram and label the plant parts accurately, learning the correct terms and vocabulary. We could press flowers or different kinds of leaves and put them onto informational posters or artwork – perhaps a table placemat. We would put seeds into a clear glass jar stuffed with cotton and a bit of water so we could observe them sprout. We could examine a small piece of sod, comparing what we see above ground with what is under the surface. We'd talk about and guide the children to discover the functions of roots (absorb, penetrate, support, anchor, feed, store food, etc). We could make a life application by discussing what it means to be "rooted in the Word of God". We could research the uses of roots and brainstorm to list roots that fit into different categories such as food, drugs, spices, dye or cloth. We could dissect a flower bulb. We would plant a "garden", whether a country-sized family garden or a small pot, so we could observe each stage of plant growth; we could make various graphs, charts or sketches to record our observations. We could do field trips for any aspect of this study, one might be to a greenhouse. We could lie in the grass and read "The Grass" by Emily Dickinson, or "Spring Grass" by Carl Sandburg. We could... (this sampling of plant activities can be found, in the Patience Unit, KONOS Character Curriculum, Volume I).

Teaching a unit on plants in this natural, integrated manner allows children to participate with all their senses - to experience the topic hands-on, which besides being loads of fun,

greatly enhances long-term retention and recall of the material studied. This style of teaching is family-friendly in that all ages can participate in the study together, enjoying the group activities, learning at their individual academic level whether that is the older student doing independent research or the younger child telling someone about the activity. The parent instructs by planning activities, sharing information, supplying appropriate resources, asking questions that require more than a “yes” or “no” answer, providing the time that is required for children to discover answers for themselves, and dialoguing about the experience or activity. All this allows the child to make meaning out of the information, which is the goal of any instruction.

Dr Jane Healy has written a book called *Endangered Minds; Why Children Can't Think and What we Can Do About It*. Her message is that while today's children are entering school with a higher IQ than in previous times, they are, on the whole, leaving schools less educated – they have fewer social skills, less language ability, less ability to listen, less motor ability and fewer experiences. While there are multiple reasons for this, Dr Healy emphasizes that we need to understand how important experiences are to learning minds – without guided experiences there aren't concepts, and without concepts there isn't attention because the information is virtually without relevance or meaning to the child. She also makes the point that an enriched environment for children is as basic as having meaningful conversation - talking *with* your children, not just talking *to* them.

Unit style teaching, by nature, is a strategy to include experience-based learning on a daily basis – children will do, touch, see, taste and smell more often than if we employ traditional classroom methods. Homeschools are the perfect setting for interactive, experiential unit style teaching that engages the whole child - **producing a more natural, meaningful and relevant education that is family- friendly while academically excellent**. Home-education can be so much more than merely doing school at home, and unit style teaching is one way to make that homeschooling experience a deeply rewarding one for the whole family.

Carol Krahn and her husband have home-schooled three children through to graduation, using primarily KONOS curriculum. Carol's on-going desire is to support, encourage, affirm and equip home-educators with tools, and information to enable them to accomplish their own goals by sharing from her experience and research. Carol is the Western Canadian KONOS Rep.

KONOS hands-on, literature-rich, character-building elementary unit studies combine serious fun with challenging academics, effectively teaching all learning styles! KONOS high school is an integrated, classical study that allows parents to mentor their teens while developing independent learners.

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