

# How to Design Interdisciplinary Units in 5 Steps

Here are five steps to ensure you effectively plan, and smoothly run, the unit:

1. **Assess Your Students and Setting:** Analyzing your environment and students' diverse learning styles will help you customize a unit to meet their needs and interests. For example, you could determine the bulk of your class struggles to contextualize many math skills. This insight can encourage you to make interdisciplinary lessons about applying math to social and political issues.

To learn more about your students, look into or reflect upon their:

- Engagement levels during different lessons
- Abilities to work by themselves and in groups
- Progression throughout the year or past years

To evaluate the classroom environment, consider if:

- Involving other teachers is needed or possible
- Dedicating enough time and resources to the unit is feasible
- Expanding learning locations by pursuing field trips or outdoor studies is needed
- A proper assessment will reveal what you can and should do.

## 2. Create an Organizing Centre

Running an interdisciplinary unit without an organizing centre is like assigning a project without instructions.

The organizing centre is the overarching focus. All of your activities and lessons must relate to it. And all the approaches and subjects students use will connect with it.

Let's use the War of 1812 as an example. Organizing centres can take the form of:

- Like a mind map to a writer, students need help applying ideas and subjects to an organizing centre. That's where essential questions come in.
- When facing a new activity, students should be able to reference its underlying essential question and — after giving some thought — understand how it applies to the organizing centre. Let's return to the War of 1812 as an example. An essential question may involve determining five long-term causes of conflict.

Each essential question should be:

- Somewhat complicated, encouraging students to divide it into simpler problems
- Rooted in concepts that are clearly applicable across subjects
- Completable within the allotted time frame
- Relevant and interesting to students

By framing and contextualizing your organizing centre with essential essentials, students should make natural connections between skills and disciplines.

### 3. Develop Essential Questions

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### 4. Plan and Run Activities

Here's the fun part. It's time to make and deliver exercises that tie into specific essential questions. Each exercise or lesson should introduce or reinforce ideas and skills, borrowing from different subjects to indicate the importance of combining disciplines.

To address the aforementioned essential question about conflict causes, you could set up learning stations. Each one could teach students about issues — political, economic, sociological and more — that amount to tension between groups. Like any lesson or unit plan, vary activity types to raise engagement levels and give students chances to reflect on content and their work.

### 5. Review Student Performance and the Unit Itself

As you use the interdisciplinary approach and the unit concludes, assess students and activities. This is not only an exercise in giving feedback to your class, but informing future interdisciplinary lessons.

To review student performance, consider evaluating:

- Products
- Teamwork
- Participation
- Critical thinking

To review the interdisciplinary unit itself, consider reflecting upon:

- Student engagement
- Connections with different subjects
- Effectiveness of the organizing centre
- Relevancy and applicability of essential questions
- If the reviews are positive, you can start planning your next interdisciplinary unit.