AMERICA, PAST AND FUTURE: A THEMATIC APPROACH*

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It was Monday. In a bare, but cavernous Middle School cafeteria sat 103 teachers, all of whom had signed up for a workshop called a "Thematic Workshop in Creative Education". Most of them were silent. Many of them looked bored. Some looked puzzled. Some talked quietly with others they knew. The leaders of the workshop stepped forward and introduced themselves. It was time to begin.

Some three weeks later, the workshop participants entered the same cafeteria in the morning. The coffee was perking, the donuts were being put out. The room was alive with colors, with physical objects. As people entered, they joked and bantered with one another. Most of them sat and talked about the day. How were their projects going? What options did you do yesterday? Did you finish your goblet? What's the schedule like? A group sat, huddled together, working on the finishing touches for their dramatic presentation for the following day. Others went to their areas to put the finishing touches on group projects. The room was full of activity, interest and cheeriness.

A lot had happened in those three weeks and a lot of learning took place. The purpose of this article is to give the reader some insights into why and how these changes took place, and into what a "thematic approach" is all about. It is also designed to illustrate how the thematic education approach can be used to create an exciting and rewarding experience for children.

In a thematic approach to teaching and learning, a theme provides the focus for learning which gives purpose and meaning to an educational experience. Students know what they are learning and why. A thematic approach can be used to help students exercise their creativity, to inquire, to do purposeful research, to communicate with other and to solve problems. Themes are often used with "hands-on" projects such as artwork, crafts, field trips and other experiential activities which help make learning exciting and fun. Themes can help students develope academic and other skills in a meaningful, integrated way.

Over a five year period (1969-73) several workshops in creative education were

conducted in Philadelphia by Sybil Marshall of Sussex University, England and a team of British educators. The workshops were designed to illustrate how a "theme" can be used to help people utilize their creativity and provide an inter-disciplinary education. The workshop participants "experienced" a learning by doing approach to education as they participated in an interdisciplinary thematic program.

This type of thematic approach can be an exciting focal point for the study of our country. Last summer the two authors of the paper* conducted a thematic work-shop for teachers at all grade levels which was based on the model utilized by Sybil Marshall. The two themes chosen for this workshop by the leaders were 1776 and 2176. We felt that a study of the United States would take on greater meaning and interest if both the past and the future were considered. We felt that it would be exciting for some of the students to be able to create a world 200 years from now while others recreated a world of 200 years ago.

In a thematic workshop, students are divided into small groups. Each group works on a specific theme or subtheme. Since we had enough students in our work-shop for eight groups of 12 to 14 each, we developed four subthemes to be used with each time period. The subthemes were:

1776	2176
Children	Children
Community	Community
Heroes and Villains	Heroes and Villains
Technology	Technology

Each group was responsible for one of the subthemes in one of the time periods. Groups were arbitrarily determined, and care was taken to divide teachers in the same schools so as to give them different experiences.

A large cafeteria, which was not being used during the summer, was our set-ting. Each one of the eight groups was assigned to a specific area of the cafeteria.

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*Three other leaders of the workshop were— Andrea Furlong, Brenda McRae and Norton J. Coleman, all teachers in the Philadelphia School District.

The leaders, prior to the workshop, had collected resources which could be used during the workshop. These and other "scrap" materials brought in by the participants were placed in several areas of the cafeteria. They included materials such as construction paper, rolls of heavy paper, some posterboards, paints, crayons, writing paper, glue, tape, scissors, a papercutter, and other similar materials. Also collected were resources about the two time periods: books and visual materials about the American Revolution, colonial life, artwork during 1776 etc., as were similar references about space and spacecraft, science fiction writing, books about the future etc. These were placed in one area of the cafeteria on tables with a sign-out borrowing procedure.

Other spaces in the cafeteria were used for different purposes. A small room located near the center of the cafeteria were used for small group projects and a large open space area was used for small group instruction in movement. A central area, nicknamed the "commons", was used as a meeting place. Participants would gather here before and after each day to review plans, evaluate the day, deal with problems and make general announcements.

Groups and individuals were responsible for a number of specific tasks. The groups were assigned three long range goals, due for completion at the end of the workshop. Each group was responsible to prepare:

1. A Physical area to represent some phase of the group's relationship to the theme. Thus the group had to develop a plan for physically converting their area into a setting which represented their theme. They used all the materials available in the workshop, and then some. Additional supplies, such as large cartons obtained in local stores were frequently obtained. The groups spent considerable time planning the organization and arrangement of their physical setting.

2. A closing presentation illustrating the subtheme. The presentation could either be dramatic, musical, in dance, with puppets and so on. The group's theatrical abilities were tested by this requirement. Groups had to write stories, create and use music and generally plan and develop a presentation with the help

of the leaders . They were also required to incorporate movement into their presentation in some way, since movement was an individual requirement of the workshop.

3. A "book" which chronicled the sub-theme in some way. "Book" was defined in general terms, the object being some recorded item related to the theme. The book could consist of a novel, or of a series of short stories, or of poetry, or of pictures. It could be developed with audiovisual media, such as a sound and light book, a tape recording or a slide tape. It could be fact, fiction or both. It was up to the group to decide how they would interpret the"book" idea.

These three group projects – transforming physical areas, creating a presentation and developing a "book" – were major components of the workshop. Specific times were scheduled which allowed the entire group or parts of the group to work on these requirements. The leaders spent time with the groups helping them to develop their group projects.

There were also individual requirements for each participant in the workshop. Four different types of sessions were included. In one, the students learned a specific skill, script writing. In the initial scriptwriting sessions they learned the technique of scriptwriting using special script pens. A final project was to produce a written piece of material in script, such as a letter, a poem or a short story. This could become part of their group's book.

A second required set of sessions was movement. Participants learned basic movement techniques. They did free form movement to different peices of music and they performed exercises. They were also required to include movement in their final presentations and many of the session were devoted to developing and polishing parts of their presentations.

A third requirement included reading. One initial session introduced the participants to the varieties of literature and resources available for both time periods and for the sub-themes. The participants were required to read a variety of materials related to their themes and sub-themes as part of the workshop.

A fourth requirement was developed to help the participants learn to work

together and to give them some new ideas for teaching. Values clarification activities sessions were included in which the participants in each group were able to get to know each other better and work together on specific problems. Each participant was also required to develop some specific values clarification activities for teaching. Many of the activities used in the sessions were related to the themes and subthemes. Some groups also used the ideas presented in their closing presentations.

The participants were also given a list of optional sessions which were to be conducted by the leaders during the workshop. They included such things as learning to play the recorder, baking bread, learning about computers and computer cards, making soap, needlepoint, planning an ideal city for the future, developing thematic "flow charts", designing colonial goblets, making candles, binding books, learning the skills of a silversmith and others. The participants were required to complete at least three of these options during the workshop, although they could also attend more than three if they wanted to.

There were also other requirements. Each participant was asked to complete a sewed square for a quilt. At the end of the workshop the squares were sewn together into a quilt. Each group was asked to develop and plan a field trip somewhwere in the Philadelphia area for one morning or one afternoon related to their theme or subtheme. They had to plan the trip by developing a set of questions that the trip would help them explore, and then write a brief report on the trip itself. The groups planned trips to relevent movies, to a computer center, to Elfreth's Alley, an historical Philadelphia street, to a local historical society, and to an historical mansion.

The workshop thus had a number of individual and group requirements which provided structure for the thematic approach. The emphasis in the activities was on the creative arts although, as we shall point out later, all subject areas were explored through the thematic emphasis. While there were specific requirements, individuals and groups could develop their own thoughts and ideas within the requirement guidelines. Thus each group had to develop a closing presentation, but exactly what

would be contained in the presentation and how it would be presented was left up to the imagination and ingenuity of the group. The leaders were there to help the group or any individual when necessary. Figure 1 summarizes the group and individual requirements developed for this workshop.

Organizing and scheduling a workshop with so many sessions, requirements and options is a difficult task and requires some organizational skills . One of the leaders spent a great deal of time developing schedules and working out organizational arrangements for the workshop. A great deal of emphasis was placed on the organization and implications for the classroom teacher were constantly discussed.

We attempted to set the tone and spirit of the workshop with a scheduled first day activity. Our workshop was part of a larger in-service program conducted by the School District of Philadelphia. In the morning, all in-service classes were brought together for some short speeches and a musical presentation by a local high school choir. We decided that we would try to develop a "dramatic" entrance into the auditorium for this meeting. We only had a short time to develop the presentation. So we picked some participants to work with one leader to make hats and another leader to organize the use of sparklers. The rest of the group worked with a leader learning to sing "Yankee Doodle" as a round. We marched into the auditorium singing "Yankee Doodle", with some participants wearing hats and others waving sparklers. It was a rousing performance, lots of fun and created an initial "esprit de corps" among the participants and the leaders.

After lunch on the first day, a warm-up activity occurred. Each group was asked to work together to develop a name tag with a symbol to represent their subtheme. They were told they could use any materials they desired to develop their name tags, that the name tags should be easily observable and that someone who looked at their symbol should easily be able to decide which group they were from. This task enabled the group to begin to get to know each other, aided the decision making processes of the group, set the tone for the workshop and enabled the group to end with a product they could be proud of. Each group developed interesting and creative ideas for symbols, including a rocketship, a 1776 style house, a test tube

SCHEDULE THURSDAY, 17 JULY

8:45   COFFEE & CAKE - MEETING - in Commons

9:15   COPPER & SILVER WORK - OPTIONAL - in Commons

         Community 1776 - Film - "Future Shock"
         Children   2176

         ALL OTHERS - Group Projects

10:15   ASTROLOGY - OPTION - in Commons

         HANDWRITING PRACTICE - OPTIONAL - small room
         EXERCISE GROUP   - OPTIONAL - gym
         VALUES   - OPTIONAL - 1776 area
         SQUARING or WEAVING - OPTIONAL - cafeteria
         RECORDER GROUP   - help for problem cases available at this time.

         OTHERS - Group or Individual Projects

11:15   ALL GROUPS - DISPLAYING OF PROJECTS
         Lecture in Commons

12:00   LUNCH

12:30   P.M. TRIPS

         CHILDREN 1776   - Elfreth's Alley
         TECHNOLOGY 1776   - Germantown Historical Society
         HEROES & VILLAINS 2176 - Movie - Rollerball
         COMMUNITY 2176   - City Planning Commision

         COMMUNITY 1776   - Movement in Gym
         CHILDREN   2176

         TECHNOLOGY 2076   - Group Projects
         HEROES & VILLAINS 1776

1:30   INDIVIDUAL PROJECT WORK
- goblets
- samplers
- quilting
- silver or copper work
- computer cards
- recorder
- creative writing
- etc. (check with leaders)

2:15   COMMUNITY 1776   -Group Meeting
         CHILDREN   2176

         TECHNOLOGY - 2176   - Group Meetings
         HEROES & VILLAINS 1776

3:00   END OF DAY MEETING - in Commons

FIGURE I

I. Group Requirements

    a. Creating a physical environment related to the theme and subtheme.
    b. Developing a closing presentation.
    c. Developing a "book".
    d. Planning a half-day field trip related to the theme.

II. Individual Requirements

    a. Script writing
    b. Movement Sessions
    c. Individual reading and research
    d. Values Clarification sessions
    e. Three options from among the following:

        1. Playing the recorder
        2. Bread baking and bread sculpture
        3. Learning about computers and computer cards
        4. Making soap
        5. Needlepoint
        6. Planning an ideal future city
        7. Developing a thematic flow chart
        8. Designing colonial goblets
        9. Designing colonial samplers
        10. Making candles
        11. Binding books
        12. Learning silversmith skills
        13. Learning backgammon
        14. Block printing
        15. Astrology
        16. Creative writing
        17. Making musical instruments
        18. Spinning and weaving
        19. Quilting
        20. Making grave rubbings

baby (for children, 2176) and so on.

Each day a schedule was prepared on news print and posted in the "commons" area. During the first week, the schedule provided for group time to plan and work on their projects, In addition, some of the required sessions were scheduled for each group. By the end of the first week, each group had one required session for all four of the individual requirements. Also, by the end of the first week, some options had been scheduled. For each option, a sign up sheet was placed in the "commons" near the daily schedule one or two days in advance of the presentation of the option. If enough students signed for the option, it was scheduled. If there were too many, it was divided into two seperate sessions. If not enough, the option was postponed. An attemp was made to schedule options in such a way that few conflicts would develop if a student had signed up for more than one option. Figure two represents an example of a daily schedule posted during the middle of the workshop.

The second week included other required sessions, more options, time for trips and group work time. Participants found themselves extremely busy during a long day, spending time working on their group project area, closing presentation and book, participating in required sessions, working on completing individual projects, attending optional sessions and doing research. There were always problems. Some groups had to learn to get along with one another. Leaders spent time with groups who had difficulty working together. Soemtimes there were problems with the schedules. Sometimes leaders had to work with individuals who were having problems completing tasks or working in groups. By the end of the second week, the group areas were beginning to take shape. One group, for example, built a replica of a sailship for the Boston Tea Party (Heroes and Villains, 1776). Another group developed a replica of a colonial community out of cardboard boxes, paper, etc. The technology 2176 group designed futuristic machines designed to illustrate technology for leisure and education in the future. The community 2176 group designed a replica of an underwater community of the future. Colorful, resplendent assortments of different size and shape objects adorned each physical area. Each group researched their subtheme,

and the leaders continually questioned them on the realism, accuracy and documentation of their work. They were often reminded that their work was to be either an authentic replica of the past or a reasonable prediction of the future based on some evidence from scientists, science-fiction writers and others.

By the third week, the workshop had reached a frenzied pace. Final presentations were scheduled for the end of the third week. Options had to be completed by Wednesday afternoon. There were still some required sessions to attend. Groups worked feverishly to complete their work. Goblets had to be finished. Samplers were worked on during free times. Small groups worked on their cities of the future. Movement sessions were scheduled for groups to practice their closing presentations. Groups practiced their dramatic presentations and worked on completing the final touches for their physical areas.

An important part of the workshop was a formal display of the participants' work. Several days before the display area was set up, each participant was asked to devise ways to display his or her work. They were asked to frame pictures if possible, to write name cards in script for their display and to generally devise interesting and unique ways to display their work. Tables were set up with table cloths. Care as to how work was being displayed was emphasized in order to reinforce each participant's feeling of pride in their work. The final displays were beautiful, adorned selections of goblets, poems and stories written in beautiful script, colonial samplers, needlepoint, baked bread, homemade soap, replicas of ideal cities of the future, flow charts and more. In addition, each group's book was added to the display.

The final presentations were scheduled towards the end of the week. Each group performed in its physical area. Performances were dramatic presentations and movement experiences. Each group designed its own costumes for the presentation. Heroes and Villains 1776 reenacted the Boston Tea Party. Technology 2176 developed a play similar to Alice in Wonderland, where the main character moves from the present into the future and has a series of adventures. Children 1776 recreated a colonial school with a charming, often hilarious presentation. Heroes and Villains 2176 developed the concept of heroes and villains in the future based on present day interpretations.

Originality, creativity and ingenuity were the order of the day.

A final time, sad to say, was devoted to cleanup--tearing down physical areas, taking home displays and other items and saying good-bye. At the end, the participants were asked to analyse and write summaries of the major insights, ideas, skills and learnings as a result of the workshop. The authors believe that the participants accomplished a great deal during this workshop and the participants responses support that idea. First, they were creative. It is probably not enough to talk about creativity, but important to experience it. The participants developed some ingenious ideas and some ingenious solutions to problems. For example, one participant wrote: "Of all the group activities, I was proudest of the books.... most of the work in the book was original. My poem "What Shall We Leave" is an original poem... I am very proud of this poem because I have never written a poem before". Another teacher wrote, "I also became aware of my own latent creativity. In working with the group some of the others would pull out ideas in helping you to build upon what you were doing. The act and process of exchanging ideas was exciting. How often, I wondered, had I fostered the opportunity for my students to communicate to the point of sharing and exchanging ideas." The teachers in the workshop developed some beautifully creative expressions of their themes. They developed ideas and applied knowledge. They created.

Second, they learned alot about their themes and subthemes. They learned about colonial and future themes and ideas from each other. One participant wrote: "One of the happiest outcomes was seeing that learning comes from all directions. Every group member supplied information and encouragement to each other. There was a flow of learning..." Another student wrote: This time-capsuled course of recreating a past world by building its physical and moral structure plus participating in its craft activities appears to be a succesful way of teaching the past by "reliving" it in the present. Some students learned alot through the optional activities. "I have become quite proficient in writing script and intend to continue practicing it for my own personal use...", is an expression of such learning. Their insights into these time periods and subjects crossed disciplinary lines. Many skills were learned.

Learning was much more significant because it had to be synthesized and, above all, applied.

Third, the teachers learned much more about interaction in groups. Many of them gained insights into the problems of working in groups, both in terms of the joys and the frustrations. There were frustrations. "I found myself very disgusted and frustrated that all of the work was being done by only a handful of people and that we were not able to work as a group... I developed a kind of indifference to the group." "The first few days of working in a new group of fourteen people were frustrating and discouraging. I was wary of leadership roles and tried to avoid the responsibilities." The groups were forced to try to work out personality differences and differences in ideas. Some people assumed leadership roles—something they had never done before. "I was weary of leadership roles and tried to avoid responsibilities... I was much more at peace with myself when I couldn't stand anarchy and began to assume some leadership." "Many times in a group situation I am usually a good follower or loner. This summer I found myself emerging in another role. I found myself constantly sharing feelings, ideas and desires. At times I found myself pushing members in the group to do more or just keeping things together." Most found the group learning valuable." Despite the problems, the different temperments and vague talents, a kind of familial tolerance grew, allowing each to push along in her or his own way. Occasionally we veered close to edginess but somehow, we overcame. This atmosphere is one I would love to have in my classroom— a pulling together, familial, safe atmosphere." Another student expressed it this way: "This course was a real people happening! You had to become involved. It was great! People were sharing, giving, helping—cooperation plus to meet the goals. I have participated in many group learning situations but this was by far the greatest. It gives me more joy to be able to translate this data into a more exciting classroom experience for my students."

Fourth, they learned a lot about themselves. We had already pointed out that many of the teachers discovered their own creativity through the workshop. One teacher expressed it in this way: "This course has reaffirmed my faith in the artful expression of my own self." Another teacher said, "Perhaps the goal that was most beneficial for my own personal development was the creation of many of what I thought to be imaginative ideas." There were many other personal learnings, ranging from feeling a new pride in oneself to an understanding of one's own feelings, thoughts and personality. Participants indicated pride in the things they made and did for the workshop. "All of the options proved to be a challange for me because I never liked to work with my hands and my artistic ability has always been shaky. The two projects I did which required some artistic ability turned out fairly well. I am very proud of them both." Another student wrote, "... you made me feel like I could really dance, like a T.V. star.. my goblet wasn't one of the best but I'm proud of it." The value clarification requirement also helped many of the participants learn about themselves. One person wrote, "In value clarification... I had a chance to think seriously and deeply about my attitudes and values." People learned to feel good about themselves. "Learning to feel good about oneself was among the main lessons of the workshop. The course showed us ways to make other people feel special and it allowed us the experience of feeling valuable." The teachers learned a lot about feelings and some were able to understand the relationships between their own feelings and those of their students. "We were placed in the position of being students when learning new skills. I will remember how I fely when trying the new handwriting over and over with little or no results. My patience with my own students and my organization of time schedules for practice will be more realistic."

They also learned a lot about themselves in relation to others and in working with others. One student expressed it this way: "The dynamics of working in a group became more real by working with the group towards a goal--social interaction, problem-solving and group evaluation were no longer just terms. How much better

I understand individual frustration because my own ideas and authority were challanged and negated by group consensus. And how proud I was when our group reached its goal and the effort was the result of 13 personalities! The experience of being part of a task-oriented group was the most valuable aspect of the workshop to me, and that experience will color some of my expectations in working with my children."

Last, but not least, the participants learned a lot about their own teaching and gained many new ideas for their classrooms. A sample of the learning includes the following:

"By using values clarification techniques I can provide my students with a stepping stone by which they can begin to understand themselves in a rapidly changing world."

"Being a fortunate person to teach idealistic wide-eyed first graders I can foresee my fun projects that we will execute as a whole group.... I can foresee movement as a nice whole class activity."

"I can visualize incorporating options into my reading program to reach the many students whom I feel cannot and will not be able to comprehend the basic skills needed to survive within their community, city and world."

"I think I have learned to trust my kids more as a result of working with instructors who trust people to do the right thing... In the future I am going to try to be more accepting of the children's mistakes and teach them how to care for our room and supplies instead of denying them the opportunity to use them... The course also served as a reminder that concrete experiences are the most quickly learned and the most long lasting for many of us... no amount of mess is to much trouble if the children can get a learning experience from it."

"I especially think that the thematic approach to teaching is good, because it gives children an oppurtunity to learn by doing, experimenting and discovering on their own without having the teacher telling them what to do all the time. With so many varied activities it is bound to give all the children something they like to do. It gives more opportunity for children who find it hard to succeed in a traditional classroom to be successful."

"The workshop served to reinforce all the positive and necessary aspects for the creation of a pleasant and rewarding learning environment, something that was a bit stifled during my first year of teaching. Planning must be flexible, but total, enabling all input to be considered. Materials, resources and time must be used wisely. Establishment of a well balanced schedule would help achieve these goals... Grouping must be carefully planned yet flexible to insure total involvement of all participants.. Using the thematic approach leaves a teacher free to do her job as a resource person, someone to guide children down the path of knowledge. Successfully motivated, children no longer view learning as a threat, but an adventure."

"I feel that the purpose of the thematic was not to give specific information. It was to do research. It was a chance to realize how we as adults, and how our children through our guidance, can learn to obtain information, use it and reuse it. The how, what, when and where of it. I find this an extremly important concept to be gained.."

The authors believe that the thematic approach can be easily adapted for use in elementary and secondary classrooms. A teacher or group of teachers can develop themes and subthematic topics around any topic. Selection might vary with the age and interest of both the teachers and the students. For example, younger children might focus on Famous people in American history, or families in American life, or different communities which make up America. Another area for study could be ethnic life in America. Older students might focus on themes such as war and peace in American life, political rights and responsibilities, colonial America, poverty and affluence in America. The list is endless and depends on the goals and interests of both the teachers and the students.

Once having decided on a theme and subtheme, teachers or groups of teachers can plan group projects and individual requirements. These projects should emphasize "hands on" experiences, and should be open ended enough to allow for creativity and inquiry. Projects can emphasize arts and crafts, movement experiances, and the like. Research skills and reading can be emphasized through

the research necessary to complete the projects. Teachers should be prepared to develop a set of resources and materials which can be used by the students, although in some cases the students themselves can compile the list of resources for their projects. Imagination and ingenuity should be encouraged. Students should also be encouraged to make decisions about how to develop their projects on their own and how to try to solve their own problems.

Once the theme and required group and individual projects are developed, a teacher or group of teachers should plan and organize the thematic experience. A teacher working on her own might start by spending some time discussing with the students what they do, having them raise questions about the theme, finding resources and discussing problems. Teachers in the elementary school might decide to devote an hour a day or a few hours a week to the thematic experience or might decide to make it a more integral part of the learning experience. Projects may or may not require the development of a physical area. If a physical area is included, the teacher needs to allocate space in the classroom or find some open space in the school that can be used for such purposes. It is possible to substitute model building and map building as an important project if such space is not available. Students should be divided into groups. During the thematic time, some students can be working on group projects while others can be working with the teacher meeting individual requirements. If a school has specialists, they can be asked to help with the thematic project. Art teachers can help the students design murals and other art projects around the theme. Physical education specialists, knowledgeable about movement, or creative dramatics teachers, can help provide other experiences. If a group of teachers can work together on such a thematic project, each teacher can take responsibility for one requirement and a schedule can be worked out whereby students are able to work with different teachers at different times. Teachers should be prepared for individual and group problems and should realize that this approach may require considerable planning both before and during experience.

The final results can be both rewarding and exciting. Students presentations and projects generally are beyond what teachers think students are capable of doing.

Students can become extremely motivated and excited about school and learning. Thematic teaching and learning can be an important approach for schools and classrooms.