

The Common-Base-With-Branches Model



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Providing for differences, always an issue of intense interest to educators, assumes even more complexity and importance as we attempt to cope with the mainstreaming of exceptional children. Our work with Newton Advanced Challenge, a Title IV-C project that seeks ways to educate gifted and talented students within heterogeneous classrooms, has centered on this issue. A model we call *common base with branching* is more appealing to teachers and more effective in reaching students than are other means of curriculum differentiation.¹

The model has two phases. In the first, a broad topic is presented to the classroom community; in the second, individuals or small groups specialize in learnings related to the topic.

The teacher first prepares a number of experiences that will be common to the class. In selecting activities, the teacher keeps several goals

in mind: developing basic understandings, building "launch points" for subsequent specializations, and teaching skills that will enable students to pursue their interests effectively. From these common base experiences, students move into learning branches that will *extend* their own interests; *combine* two or more interests; *open* new, personally uncharted areas; and *connect* the work of the classroom to the world outside the classroom.

Managing learning this way isn't easy, but it is workable. In the first phase of a unit, the teacher usually makes one preparation. In the transition between base and branches, the teacher helps students select their learning specialities. Once a project has been selected, the students sign a contract describing the product and proposing a reasonable time for its completion. During the second phase, teachers are free to work with individuals or small groups during class time or by special appointment. Students are generally involved, committed, and interested in their own and each others' explorations. There is never a question of why some students and not others are given certain assignments.

The curriculum is differentiated in this model, by focusing on differences in interest. Teachers make a conscious effort to transform the classroom into a community of inquiry, where a topic is presented in terms of its broader relevance to all students and then is pursued in directions reflecting the talents and proclivities of individuals. Students strive to attain as high a level of excellence as they can in an aspect of the subject they find interesting and worthwhile. No single standard of excellence—such as the writing of a term paper—is considered the sole measure of status and worth.

Figure 1 is an example of how the common-base-with-branches model was actually used in a ninth-grade English class.

This example suggests that the teacher in the common-base-with-branches model should feel comfortable managing a wide range of activities that are not equally academic. The teacher should also be skillful in helping students create networks of interests; encouraging and limiting students in their topic selections; setting standards that are high relative to each student's ability; and creating a tone in the classroom in which individual differences and interests are

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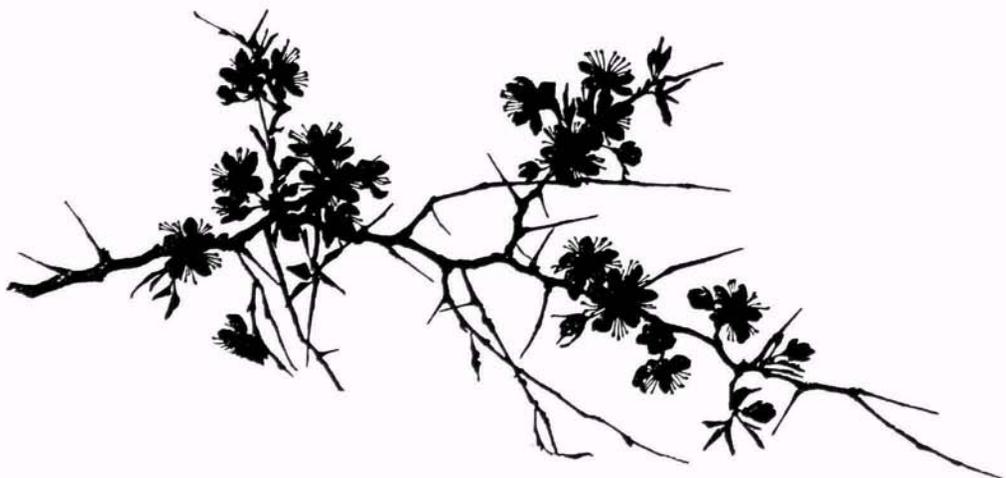


Figure 1: A Sample Common-Base-With-Branches Model.

genuinely respected by peers. To prepare for the common experiences, the teacher must gather materials for a variety of learning styles. To prepare for the branchings, the teacher must know what the interest launch points will be and what skills must be taught to facilitate student explorations.

Encouraging students to create their own topics (or to do so with teacher guidance) is preferable to offering them a list of projects from which to choose, even though such a list must necessarily be in the teacher's mind during the preparation of the study. It is just not possible to anticipate every student topic choice, and we have found that exhaustive lists of topics or projects actually limit student imagination and initiative.

Providing for individual differences in the heterogeneous classroom by offering whole class experiences in topics broad enough to include a range of interests and abilities, preparing students with necessary skills, and expecting students to take some initiative for their own learning—or, in other words, by providing a common base with the possibility of branchings—is the most effective and efficient way for a teacher to reach and teach most students in today's demanding educational climate. ■

¹These include use of self-pacing materials, individualized instruction, and curriculum leveling or ability grouping within the classroom.

Common Base: The study of *Romeo and Juliet* by a ninth-grade class.

Assignments given to every student:

- Read *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare.
- Read Sonnets 143 and 65 by Shakespeare; learned the Elizabethan sonnet form; wrote a sonnet in this form.
- Heard a lecture on middle and modern English.
- Heard a lecture on Latinate and Anglo-Saxon words in the English language.
- Heard a lecture on the Globe Theater and its audience.
- Wrote a paper on the life of Shakespeare and the scope and variety of his plays.
- Was introduced to the controversy over the authorship of the plays.
- Wrote three papers: (1) "Love as I See It"; (2) choice of: "Love as Others See It," "Self Love," "Love and Hate," "Maturity"; (3) "Love as Played Out by Seven Characters in *Romeo and Juliet*."
- Memorized 14 lines from *Romeo and Juliet*.
- Saw the Zeffereilli film, *Romeo and Juliet*.
- Completed a project, a "branching." It could be visual, tactile, dramatic, written.

Branches: The study of *Romeo and Juliet* by a ninth-grade class.

Assignments completed by individual students:

- J. read *Weep Not Child* by James Ngugi and in a paper compared the two versions of the love story.
- D. studied word derivations of the speeches of Escalus and the lovers. He made a tabulation of the numbers of Latinate and Anglo-Saxon words.
- S. read more sonnets, learned the Petrarchan form, wrote several sonnets of her own.
- G. read about the Globe Theater and built a scale model.
- M. and L. located the imagery in Mercutio's speeches and illustrated this in watercolor.
- M., R., F., L. memorized and dramatized a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*.
- H. read several plays by Shakespeare, kept a list of the emotions, historical events, and occupations Shakespeare seemed to be knowledgeable about.
- Sixteen students read and discussed *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, noted the language and plot connections to *Romeo and Juliet*, and attended the Brustein production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Loeb Theater.
- J. wrote a paper proving that Lewis Carroll was the real author of Shakespeare's plays. He also rewrote *Alice in Wonderland* in dramatic form: five acts, prologues, all in iambic pentameter.
- J. wrote another paper showing how the plot *Romeo and Juliet* would have been different had there been a little more or less love in each of several characters. In the paper, J. rewrote the plot three times.
- S. wrote a satirical review of *Romeo and Juliet*; he had not liked reading the play.
- M. compared the language of the lovers and its imagery to the language of the other characters and concluded that as no one in the play could understand the lovers, their deaths were inevitable.
- D. drew a representation of the sword fight in Act III.
- W., M., L., C. painted or drew their favorite scene or character from *Romeo and Juliet*.

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