# Model Curriculum Units: One Teacher's Experience

***"The students were fascinated with the content. There were so many connections that made history relevant to what is happening in the world today."***

*Rachel Alemany, Special Education Teacher*

# Theodore Herberg Middle School, Pittsfield School District

## *Tryout Overview*

***The Crusades,*** *World History I, Grade 8*

The purpose of this two to three week unit is to help students understand the complexity of issues surrounding the Crusades. Through the analysis of primary sources, students will be able to discuss the cause and effect relationship of these events and apply it to a broader understanding of world history. Students will write and perform a speech recruiting soldiers to fight on either side of the Crusades.

## *Summary*

Theodore Herberg Middle School's academic focus is for students to demonstrate measurable growth in their ability to think critically and creatively through their writing. The Crusades model curriculum unit (MCU) not only aligned well to the school-wide focus, but also to the Pittsfield School District's curriculum. Rachel Alemany, an eighth grade special education teacher for the Educational Options for Success (EOS) program, volunteered to participate in the Crusades MCU tryout  in hopes that the UbD unit design would support the academic needs of her student'.  Alemany adheres to the district curriculum, but at times finds herself challenged to match the students' needs with the curriculum frameworks. At first, Alemany was unsure how successful the Crusades unit would be with her students due to its complexity. However, she found that the Understanding by Design unit design, which

focused on the enduring understandings and essential questions, was a great fit for meeting her students' needs and kept them actively engaged throughout the three week unit.

Recognizing the variety of student needs and academic levels within the program, Alemany made some modifications to the unit while maintaining fidelity to the unit's expectations of student outcomes. Modifications such as providing additional background information to set context, outlining the content in a very structured way, using maps and additional text to support students' understanding, and adding videos to the lessons allowed all students within the program access to the content. The modifications Alemany made enhanced the experience for students without changing the content.

The UbD unit design was a new experience for Alemany. Although she is a veteran teacher, using ***the UbD planning model was an eye opening experience, as it allowed her students to focus on the big picture and connect enduring understandings.*** Traditionally, it was difficult to maintain students' interest and focus on a social studies unit that seemed so removed from the students' world. However, the unit design helped to capture the students' interest and impacted their learning in other content areas weeks after completion of the unit's activities. The impact was far greater than anticipated based on previous experiences with a more traditional unit design approach. Due to such a positive experience, Alemany has recommended the unit to the entire eighth grade team next year.

## *Recommendations*

### *What changes, if any, will you make to the unit design to better align with your school's needs?*

Changes to the unit will always be dependent on the students in the EOS program. The important factor is that the unit has the structure and capabilities to meet many students' learning needs without impacting the required content. The unit provided ample opportunities for a teacher to fill in gaps while still expecting students to support their claims based on evidence from the text. ***The instructional tips and strategies embedded in the unit provided great ideas to support student learning.*** Students found the word bank very useful in helping to build academic vocabulary since some of their knowledge of the terms was at a very basic level. Additionally, the Curriculum Embedded Performance Assessments (CEPA) were flexible enough to modify for students, but still hold students accountable for demonstrating their learning.

***What recommendations would you give to other teachers as they begin to implement the model curriculum units in their classrooms?***

When working with a student population who may have specific learning needs, remember that there is a lot of room for flexibility when delivering the lessons based on your students' needs. There is enough in the unit to challenge all your students while still being adaptable. Keep in mind the essential questions and the enduring understandings when modifying the unit to ensure the focus remains. This approach enabled students to think critically and at a deeper level connecting them to their own world. It was a great experience for all students.

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## Additional Model Curriculum Units

ESE will be sharing approximately **90 model curriculum units** for K-12 teachers in ELA, mathematics, history and social science, and science, technology, and engineering content areas. These units will be made available to all districts throughout the Commonwealth for the 2013-2014 school year. For additional information about upcoming releases visit: http://www.doe.mass.edu/candi/model/.