



Writing Big Ideas for Biliteracy Units (BUFs)

Part 1: Introduction

Begin with Science or Social Studies Standards

When you are developing a biliteracy unit (BUF), you need to **begin with your state academic standards** or the **common core standards**.

If you will be using a locally developed curriculum, you may want to make sure that the curriculum has been developed around your state standards. As a public school teacher, your state academic standards outline what you are required to teach. And it is worth mentioning here that a textbook or science program is **not** a curriculum. A textbook or packaged program is a **resource** for teaching either state standards or a local curriculum, but does not define the curriculum.

In Part 1 here, I will go through the thinking and refining process required to create a big idea.

Example number 1

Let's look at a sample instructional focus and think about it in relation to state standards:

Fall holidays. (Kindergarten)

**The first question you want to ask is,
“Do my state standards mention
learning about fall holidays in Kindergarten?”**

State academic standards are not usually so specific. They usually point to more general knowledge, like:

*The student understands that holidays are celebrations of special events.
The student is expected to: (A) explain the reasons for national patriotic holidays such as Presidents' Day, Veterans Day, and Independence Day;
and (B) identify customs associated with national patriotic holidays such as parades and fireworks on Independence Day.*

This example was taken from the Texas State Standards, available:
<http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter113/ch113a.html>

OR

Explain why individuals, groups, issues and events are celebrated with local, state or national holidays or days of recognition (e.g., Lincoln’s Birthday, Martin Luther King’s Birthday, Pulaski Day, Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Labor Day, Veterans’ Day, Thanksgiving).

This example was taken from the Illinois State Standards, available:
http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils/social_science/standards.htm

It is important to note that while both standards mention specific holidays, those holidays are mentioned as examples, rather than as the unique focus of the instruction.

So, in looking at our state standards, the focus must be reworked to:

Holidays

Once you have made sure you are focusing on your state standards, you need to think about creating a **big idea**. Big ideas, or essential understandings, outline what you want all students to know and understand when they reach the summative assessment in the biliteracy unit framework (BUF).

Big ideas must be able to complete the sentence, “I want my students to understand that...”

As you can see, “**I want my student to understand that *holidays***” is not a complete sentence. As teachers we need to ask ourselves, “Well, what do we want our students to understand about holidays?” At this point, it is important to go back to the standard, and identify what the standard expects. So, in looking at the standards, the big idea becomes

***I want my students to understand that...
we celebrate holidays in order to remember or honor historical events or people, and there are certain customs associated with celebrating some of these holidays.***

The next question we ask is, “Is this a big idea or a detail?”

To check if it is a big idea or detail, we see if we can give an example.

I want my students to understand that we celebrate holidays in order to remember or honor historical events or people, and there are certain customs associated with celebrating some of these holidays.

For example, on Independence Day, we are celebrating the independence of the United States from England. It is typical to celebrate this holiday with a parade and fireworks.

If you can give several examples of the big idea, it is indeed a big idea and not a detail.

When we teach big ideas, we want to make sure to have students study several examples of the big idea. For the big idea above, in order to truly teach to the standard (which mentions holidays in the plural), it would be essential to study several holidays in order for students to understand that other holidays, not just Independence Day, are in celebration of an event or a person.

When children are taught a big idea through one example only (only studying Independence Day) they have a harder time generalizing their learning to other situations. So, in this example, students may learn that Independence Day is in celebration of a historical event, but not understand that Veteran's Day is also in celebration of a historical event. To really make sure children have understood the big idea, children need to study several examples.

So, while we started with **Fall Holidays**, we went through the thinking and refining process to come up with the big idea:

I want my students to understand that we celebrate holidays in order to remember or honor historical events or people, and there are certain customs associated with celebrating some of these holidays.

The above example was taken from social studies. If you teach in a state that has adopted the Next Generation Science Standards, the work in creating big ideas has already been done for you. The **Disciplinary Core Ideas** (the orange box) and the **Crosscutting Concepts** (green box) are already written as big ideas, and can be used with the BUF. The Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) are available here:

<http://standards.nsta.org/AccessStandardsByTopic.aspx>

For more information on writing big ideas in science, see Writing Big Ideas for Biliteracy Units, Part 2.