**UNIT RATIONALE**

This unit is designed to introduce students to the unique civilization of the Tigris and Euphrates river civilization, otherwise known as Mesopotamia. This unit was created using the backward design approach as described by Wiggins and McTighe (2001). Backward design starts with identifying the desired goals of the unit. In today’s educational world, most unit goals correlate to state educational standards. This unit correlates with the 2010 Ohio Academic Content Standards for Social Studies in grade six. Our unit goal specifically correlated with sixth grade content statement #2, which states, “Early civilizations (India, Egypt, China and Mesopotamia) with unique governments, economic systems, social structures, religions, technologies, and agricultural practices and products flourished as a result of favorable geographic characteristics. The cultural practices and products of these early civilizations can be used to help understand the Eastern Hemisphere today.” This unit focuses solely on the Mesopotamian river civilization and each lesson has a specific focus on the geographic characteristics, agricultural practices and products, economic system, social structure, government, religion, or technology of the ancient Mesopotamians. In addition, the goals of this unit correlate to the five themes of geography, which include location, place, human/environment interaction, movement, and region. The five themes of geography are often abstract concepts to upper elementary students. Therefore, this unit incorporates several instructional practices from Gandy’s “Developmentally Appropriate Geography.” These instructional practices make abstract material more comprehensible for students by providing concrete experiences for students to better understand geography concepts. For example, in lessons seven through ten, students research aspects of religion and technology in ancient Mesopotamia. This lesson relates to Gandy’s “Developmentally Appropriate Geography” because “technology and geography are an integral part of school curriculums today” (p. 2). The five themes of geography were combined with the 2010 Ohio Academic Content Standards for Social Studies to develop the two essential questions on which our unit is based.

After the essential questions were identified, the next step of the backward design process is to “derive the curriculum from the evidence of learning (performances)” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2001, p. 8). Therefore, authentic assessments were identified that would determine if students achieved the desired results and met the unit goals. Authentic assessments ask students to apply their skills and knowledge in meaningful ways. In addition, the backward design process states that there must be a “continuum of assessment methods includes checks of understanding and performance tasks and projects. They vary in scope (from simple to complex), time frame (from short-term to long-term), setting (from decontextualized to authentic contexts), and structure (from highly to nonstructured)” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2001, p. 13). Therefore, this unit incorporates a variety of assessments that occur throughout the unit. Our unit includes a pre-assessment because, according to Heacox, students should be pre-assessed because “formal pre-assessments provide information about specific students’ prior knowledge and skills” (p. 28). In addition, this unit includes a post-assessment because “the purpose of summative assessment is to provide information about whether our students have met our unit’s goals. Based on your students’ results, you may decide that you are ready to move on to your next curricular unit” (p. 44). In addition, this unit includes a variety of assessments throughout the lessons, including observation, entrance and exit slips, discussion, and rubrics.

The final step of the backward design process is to plan learning experiences and instruction. According to Wiggins and McTighe (2001), “With clearly identified results (enduring understandings) and appropriate evidence of understanding in mind, educators can now plan instructional activities” (p. 13). This unit’s lessons were created using a variety of instructional methods and resource materials, which would actively lead students toward achieving the desired goals of the unit.

Additionally, this unit incorporates project-based learning. Project-based learning is a “comprehensive instructional approach to engage students in sustained, cooperative investigation” (Bransford & Stein, 1993). This framework allows students to work together to solve problems in social studies. The two essential components of project-based learning include a driving, or essential, question that “serves to organize and drive activities, which taken as a whole amount to a meaningful project” and a culminating product or “multiple representations as a series of artifacts, personal communication, or consequential task that meaningfully addresses the driving question” (Brown & Campione, 1994). This unit follows the project-based learning process in the following ways. First, students identify essential questions. They divide into cooperative learning groups and put their ideas into question format. Next, students gather information and generate answers to the essential questions. Students collect and analyze data and research using developmentally appropriate technologies. Then students create a product, which is an artifact box with artifacts that represent several aspects of early Mesopotamian history. Finally, students share several of these artifacts to the class, which results in the generation of future research questions.

These teaching methodologies were chosen because they support our developed Best Practices protocol. According to Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (2005), the term Best Practices refers to “the current, research-based standard of instruction” (p. vi). This unit includes aspects of many Best Practices, including encouraging a student-centered and collaborative classroom environment, engaging in authentic and experiential activities and assessments, and promoting cognitive thinking. These Best Practices were selected through extensive research and collaboration among peers. This unit is student-centered because “it involves building on the natural curiosity children bring with them and asking kids what they want to learn” (Zemelman, et al., 2005, p. 12). In this unit, the students help develop the essential questions that they research throughout the unit. This unit is also social and collaborative because “it promotes children’s learning *with and from* one another” (Zemelman, et al., 2005, p. 19). In this unit, students work with their peers to identify and research answers to the essential questions. Working in small group allows learners to “receive much more extensive feedback from fell students than they can ever get from a single teacher...” (Zemelman, et. al., 2005, p. 19). Therefore, students practice their social skills while learning. This type of learning environment allows students to prepare for their future in America’s workplace. This unit also implements experiential, authentic activities. Experiential activities allow students to learn from *doing* rather than hearing about a subject. In this unit, students actively research and create artifacts that represent multiple aspects of early Mesopotamian society. Students are also engaged in activities and assessments that are authentic, or truly value “thought and knowledge” (Zemelman, et. al., 2005, p. 14). In this unit, students must use extensive thought to select artifacts that represent aspects of Mesopotamian civilization. In addition, the assessments require students to show their knowledge in meaningful ways. Finally, this unit as a whole promotes cognitive thinking. This means that students develop a true understanding of each lesson’s concepts through higher order thinking and inquiry-based learning. The project-based learning framework provides a formal avenue for students to explore social studies concepts through inquiry-based learning. In addition, this unit promotes metacognition, or “becoming aware of one’s own thinking and concepts” (Zemelman, et. al., 2005, p. 15). Throughout this unit, students must organize and interpret research and apply this thinking to the creation and presentation of a project. Finally, students reflect on the unit and analyze how the concepts they learned throughout the learning apply to an improved knowledge of the early Mesopotamian river civilization.

***Resources:***
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