

Study of Teachers Institute Curriculum Units

By Ellen Eliason Kisker

In Teachers Institute seminars the faculty seminar leader guides participating teachers (Fellows) in learning about the seminar topic, and the Fellows develop curriculum units on some aspect of the topic. Writing a unit is intended to solidify teacher learning and help Fellows work out, with support from their seminar leader and other Fellows, how to take some part of what they learned in the seminar into their classroom to share with students.

Unlike most commercial curriculum materials, Teachers Institute Curriculum Unit Guidelines require units to emphasize subject matter and teaching approaches, and the program expects Fellows not to provide complete lesson plans. Nearly all unit authors leave their seminar planning to do more work on their units before implementing them, and other teachers using the units should expect to adapt the units to meet their own needs.

Institute Curriculum Units Are Written for Diverse Students

A systematic review of Institute units showed that, across seminars and locations, Teachers Institute curriculum units are written in all core subject areas and target students in all grades from kindergarten through 12th grade. Units are usually written for both the least and most advanced students.

The diversity of their students led some unit authors to discuss differentiation (35 percent of units), how to create a positive learning environment (23 percent of units), or how to address anticipated challenges, such as frequent student absences, in teaching the unit (23 percent of units).

Most Institute Curriculum Units are Clearly Written, Accurate, and Usable by Another Teacher

Teachers Institute curriculum units are written with an audience of other teachers in mind. A systematic review by teacher reviewers determined that 81 percent of the

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units are written clearly, and the subject matter and teaching strategies could be understood by other teachers.

Faculty reviewers indicated that the content of the subsample of units they reviewed was accurate in all cases, but the depth of understanding demonstrated varied from superficial understanding (10 percent of units) to in-depth understanding (55 percent of units).

Teacher reviewers found most curriculum units (87 percent) to be usable by another teacher. The small proportion of units found to be unclear or not easily usable is notable, given that teachers are not selected for the program based on prior preparation or skill in writing.

Both Authors and Other Teachers Use Institute Curriculum Units

Curriculum units forge a strong link between Institute seminars and teachers' classrooms. Nearly all Fellows use the units they write, and it is common for them to use units written by other Fellows also.

Other teachers use Institute curriculum units, too. While the extent of use by other teachers is uncertain, the study found that 11 percent of other teachers in New Haven had used Institute units. A Web pop-up survey also identified thousands of teachers across the country and around the world who had used or planned to use the Institute curriculum units they found online.

Teachers Use Institute Curriculum Units in Multiple Ways

New Haven Fellows who responded to an online survey were most likely to implement their own units as written (49 percent of Fellows) or with adaptations (49 percent of Fellows), such as rearranging the unit to fit the curriculum, implementing parts of the unit at various times, adapting the unit to a different grade or to differentiate instruction, supplementing the unit to fit the needs of particular classes, and adjusting pacing or activities based on experience teaching the unit or in response to student interest while teaching the unit. Many Fellows also used the teaching strategies

(57 percent of Fellows) or subject matter (41 percent of Fellows) from the unit to prepare for teaching other materials.

When using Institute units written by other teachers, New Haven teachers were most likely to read the teaching strategies (66 percent of teachers) or subject matter (62 percent of teachers) in the units to get ideas or prepare for teaching their own curriculum. Many reported that they implemented the most recent unit they had used with adaptations (43 percent of teachers) or read the bibliography to identify other resources (31 percent of teachers).

Teachers Compare Institute Units Favorably to Commercial Curriculum

Institute curriculum units are well-regarded. In New Haven, nearly all teachers who responded to the online survey were satisfied with the units they had used and planned to implement again the unit they had used most recently.

Most teachers reported that, compared with commercial curriculum they have used, Institute units elicit the same or greater student attention, interest, and motivation, and lead to the same or higher student mastery. More than half reported that Institute units were superior overall to commercial curriculum materials they have used.

Publication of Institute Units Online Extends Their Use

Publication of Teachers Institute curriculum units online leads to their use by thousands of other teachers, many of them public school teachers, across the country and around the world. A Web pop-up survey, even with a low response rate, documented use by more than two thousand teachers over a 17-month period. These teachers were most likely to read the subject matter or teaching strategies to prepare for teaching other materials or to implement the unit with adaptations.

I found that the units contained rigor and caused students to think and reflect in ways that they are unaccustomed to with the current curriculum.

— New Haven teacher

Teachers Institute Curriculum Unit Study

The study focused on curriculum units completed in 2014 and 2015 in three Teachers Institutes (Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Delaware Teachers Institute, and Teachers Institute of Philadelphia) and the Yale National Initiative.

The study drew on multiple data sources, reflecting different perspectives on curriculum units:

1. online questionnaires completed by Fellows at the end of the program;
2. a systematic review of curriculum units;
3. a Web pop-up survey (Yale National Initiative and Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute Web sites only);
4. online teacher survey (New Haven, CT school district only); and
5. focus groups (Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute only).