



Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute

Executive Summary: Study of Teachers Institute Curriculum Units

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Executive Summary:

Study of Teachers Institute Curriculum Units¹

Public school districts, in partnership with one or more universities and colleges, form Teachers Institutes that offer seminars led by faculty on topics that teachers have identified as important to their work. The seminar schedules vary across Institutes, but typically seminars meet weekly over a period of several months. In the 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. The curriculum units are also published online for other teachers to use.

Curriculum Units are Central to the Teachers Institute Approach

Writing a curriculum 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.

Fellows benefit in a variety of ways from writing a curriculum unit in a Teachers Institute or Yale National Initiative seminar. At the end of their seminar, nearly all Fellows reported gaining knowledge of the seminar topic, and some described how writing helped them absorb more knowledge of the topic and how feedback and suggestions from their seminar leader deepened their understanding. According to Fellows, deeper knowledge of the subject of their curriculum unit boosted their confidence in teaching it.

Teachers Institute Curriculum Unit Study

The study focuses 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 draws 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).

Institute Curriculum Units Differ from Commercial Curriculum

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.

The Guidelines identify the key elements that must be included in a curriculum unit (a statement of subject matter, a plan for teaching it, examples of classroom activities, lists of resources, and an explanation of how the unit implements academic standards), and most units include the required elements. Curriculum units are limited to 25 single-spaced pages in printed form.

End-of-program questionnaires show that nearly all unit authors leave their seminar planning to do more work on their units before implementing them, and other teachers

¹ Prepared by Ellen Eliason Kisker, Twin Peaks Partners, LLC, January 31, 2018.

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 in classes that

“Students are mostly African American and Hispanic, many from families that struggle financially. Many are immigrants or students who transfer from the suburbs. All are natives to instant communications and almost all carry smart devices in their pockets.” *(from a curriculum unit included in the review)*

often include ESL students, special education students, and gifted and talented students. Most units provide context by describing characteristics of the students to whom the author plans to teach the unit.

The diversity of their students led some unit authors to discuss differentiation (35% of units), how to create a positive learning environment (23% of units), or how to

address anticipated challenges, such as frequent student absences, in teaching the unit (23% of units).

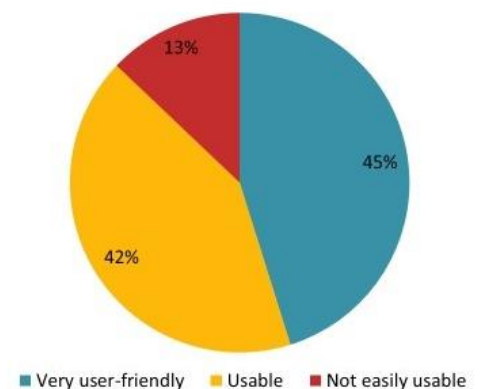
A Systematic Review Found That Most Institute Curriculum Units are Clearly Written, Accurate, and Usable by Another Teacher

Teachers Institute curriculum units are written with an audience of other teachers in mind. A systematic review by teacher reviewers determined that 81% of the 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% of units) to in-depth understanding (55% of units).

Teacher reviewers found most curriculum units (87%) 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.

Usability



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, sharing what they learned in their seminar with their students.

It is common for Fellows to use units written by other Fellows also. In New Haven, CT, where a long-established Teachers Institute operates, half of the Fellows who responded to an online teacher survey had used units written by other Fellows.

Other teachers use Institute curriculum units, too. At the end of their seminar, most Fellows report that they plan to share their unit with other teachers. While the extent of use by other teachers is uncertain, the study found that 11% 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

Institute curriculum units, which focus on subject matter and teaching strategies but do not include complete lesson plans, can be used in a variety of ways. New Haven Fellows who responded to an online survey were most likely to implement their own units as written (49% of Fellows) or with adaptations (49% of Fellows). The types of adaptations reported include 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% of Fellows) or subject matter (41% of Fellows) from the unit to prepare for teaching other materials.

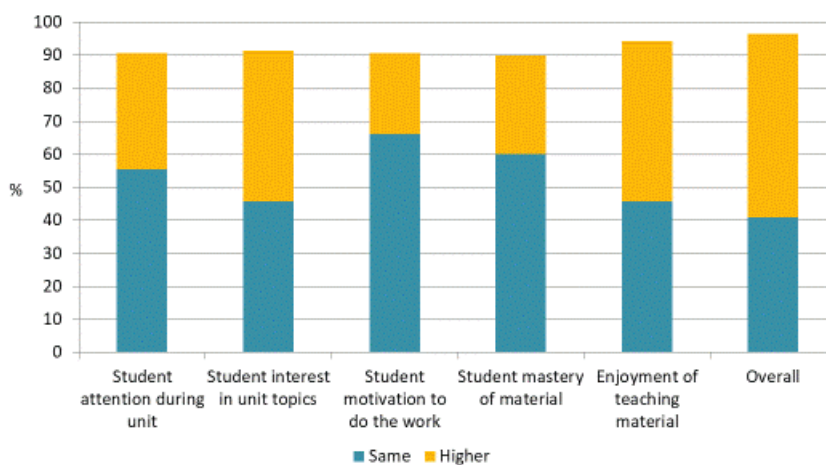
When using Institute units written by other teachers, New Haven teachers were most likely to read the teaching strategies (66% of teachers) or subject matter (62% of teachers) in the units to get ideas or prepare for teaching their own curriculum. Many reported that they implemented the most recent unit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

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.

Fellows and other teachers in New Haven who had used Institute curriculum units as written or with adaptations reported that they compare favorably to commercial curriculum materials they had used.

Institute Curriculum Units Compared With Commercial Curriculum Materials



Most New Haven teachers found that Institute curriculum units usually require as much or more preparation time than commercial curriculum units. 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.

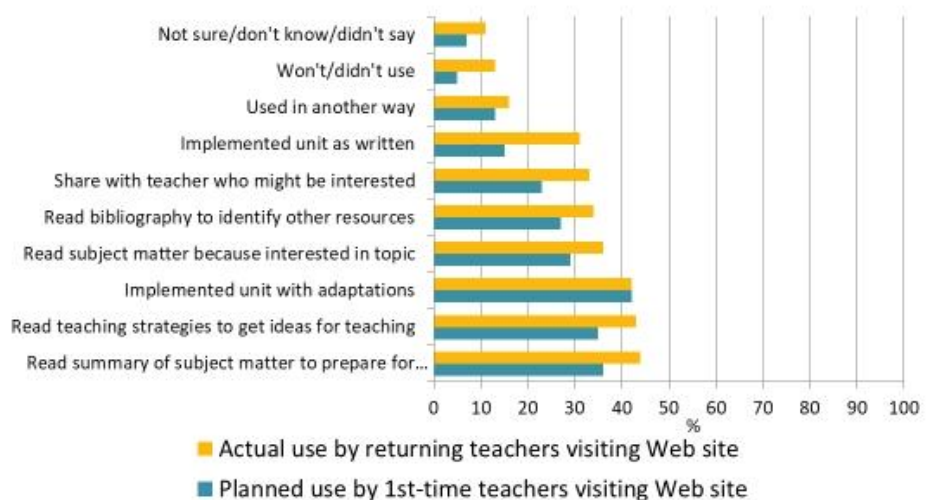
“I found that the units contained rigor and caused students to think and reflect in ways that they are unaccustomed to with the current curriculum.” *(New Haven teacher)*

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.

The use of Institute curriculum units by teachers who responded to the Web pop-up survey is similar to that of the teachers in New Haven. They were most likely to read the subject matter or teaching strategies to prepare for teaching other materials or to implement the unit with adaptations. Many read the subject matter because they were interested, read the bibliography to identify other resources, or shared the unit with another teacher who might be interested.

Other people who found Institute curriculum units online and responded to the survey also reported they were useful. Most often, they planned to use the units to learn about a subject in which they were interested or to identify other resources about the subject matter that may be useful.



For more information...

For more information about the Teachers Institute or the research summarized in this brief, please send inquiries to: teachers@yale.edu

Teachers Institute curriculum units are published online and can be reached through the following Web site: <http://teachers.yale.edu/units/>