

GLAD®ifying my Yearly Thematic Units & How You Can, Too!

by Bonnie Sam—1st Grade Teacher, Governor Bent Elementary, Albuquerque, NM

Promising practices...

You've completed the entire six-day OCDE Project GLAD® Foundations training! Or maybe you've been trained for many years, and over time have slowly stopped utilizing and even forgotten the strategies. This can happen thanks to curriculum changes happening every 5-6 years, new administration at your school or district, and policies evolving statewide. Either way, it can feel a bit daunting to look at all of the options that GLAD® offers you when planning. Where to start?

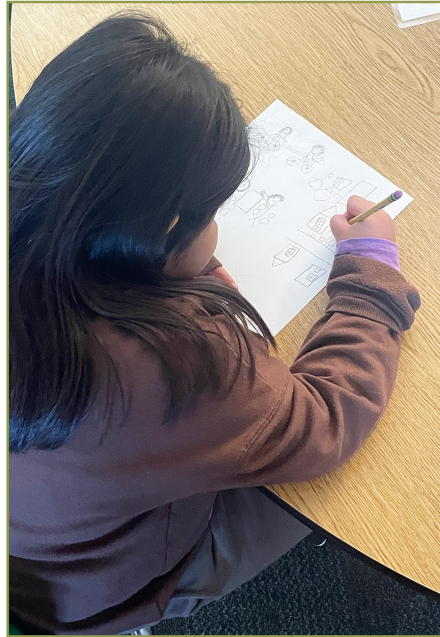
Over the years, and the constant evolution and challenges that teaching has thrown my way, I have developed some guiding questions and frameworks that help me to plan, collaborate, and begin teaching thematic units. These units not only align to the current district curriculum, but they also still allow me to be creative and interested in the content. I also know that with GLAD® included, I am using research-based best practices that will support all of my students in their language learning and educational journeys, while they have fun with content.

Guiding Question #1: What thematic units am I already teaching?

Oftentimes, there is no need to start from scratch when it comes to incorporating GLAD® strategies into what you are already teaching. As teachers, we take pride in our content, and especially thematic units that we have already put a lot of time and effort into creating. I find it really helpful to make a curriculum map for the entire school year, to chart out what I do each month, and make sure to include units that I have worked hard to create.

It is important to do some reflection at this time, too, and consider—have my students enjoyed this topic in the past, and does it keep them engaged?

Do I enjoy this content, and find it interesting to teach? Why did I choose to create a unit around this topic in the first place? Does the big idea of this unit align with the content and grade-level standards I am required to address?



Mrs. Sam uses Listen and Sketch, a GLAD® strategy that develops visualization and comprehension and promotes active listening.

A highly engaging unit about a topic that interests you and your students is wonderful, but, as a professional, you still have to tie it to the content you should be covering. So, I always make sure to double check NM State Social Studies and NexGen Science Standards to be sure that what I am planning aligns with those expectations.

For the past seven years, the thematic units that my first-grade team and I cover have changed slightly and pivoted, but they usually follow the same schedule. For example, a unit that we developed based on the Benchmark ELA curriculum was all about how to be a helpful citizen in your community. With

the rollout of SAVVAS MyView, we had to adjust this unit to fit the overarching theme of what one might find in a neighborhood community and how to be a good neighbor. Some of the input strategies, such as the Graphic Organizer needed to change, but we were still able to use the same Communities Here, There Chant from the previous unit. Also, vocabulary words that we selected for our Picture Dictionaries changed—citizen became neighbor, while we kept other words like community, urban, rural, and suburban.

It became easier with time to take the structure and information from an earlier unit to shape a new one without having to start with something completely new.

Guiding Question #2: What parts of the current curriculum am I already using?

—continued on page 9—

Soleado—Spring 2026



—continued from page 8—

The thought of a boxed curriculum that our districts purchase and give to us can bring about a lot of feelings: resentment, frustration, excitement, exhaustion, the list goes on! As educators, we know to expect a change in our ELA and math curriculum every 5-7 years, but that doesn't mean that it gets easier with each change.

Over the course of my career, I have used and adapted three different curricula in both math and ELA, and in three different grade levels. I think we can all agree that you will never get to every single part of the curriculum, and not every resource will or should be used. That is the beauty of teaching; we get to be so creative! We are also incredibly skilled at picking and choosing, supplementing, and adapting the materials to meet the needs of our students.

GLAD® can be your best friend when it comes time to breathe life into a boxed curriculum. When I am faced with a new program (in ELA especially), the first thing I do is look at the overview of each unit for the entire year, and what the overarching theme, or “big idea,” is for each. I then reflect on these questions:

- ✓ Does this fit in with anything I have taught in the past?
- ✓ What are elements that are similar and what are different?
- ✓ What are the objectives for each unit in the domains of reading, writing, speaking, and listening?
- ✓ What are the essential questions and enduring understandings?
- ✓ What texts are available through this curriculum?
- ✓ What trade books do I already have that would fit in as a text set to support it?

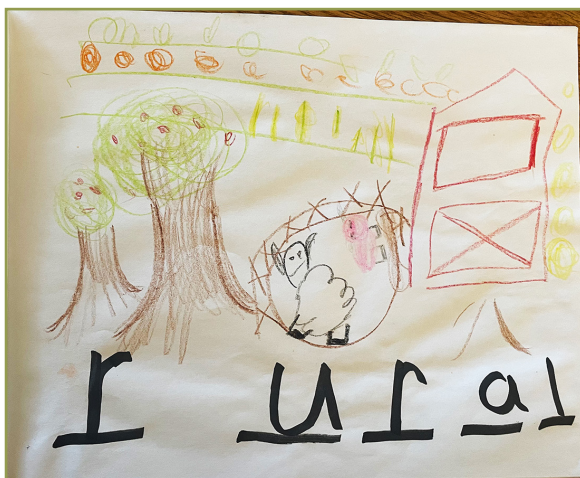
I then start to put this information into a planner template that I use to help guide the planning process while collaborating with my

grade-level team. Knowing the overall purpose of a unit and writing it down, helps me to envision **what** I want to accomplish with my students. Next will come the **how**, which is achieved through the implementation of GLAD® strategies.

Guiding Question #3: What are some gaps that I see in this curriculum that I need to make sure to fill?

No curriculum is perfect; we all know this! And I know I often find myself saying “Where was this created? Because it does not fit the needs and backgrounds of our students here in New Mexico!” This is where the gaps become evident, and where we really get to find the fun elements to start supplementing.

As a first-grade teacher, my first priority is phonics, and giving my students access to decodable texts that allow them constant practice with the skills we are covering. I also am looking for diverse trade books or texts that I can use as daily read-alouds to expose my students to narrative and informational text structure and rich vocabulary that are representative of them and their classmates. I also search for visual elements within the curriculum such as anchor charts, realistic photographs, and illustrations that I can create and have posted as a reference in the classroom. As a TESOL-endorsed educator, I look at the strategies and activities offered to support my multilingual learners. We all have those specific resources that we seek out first, because we know what our students need.



Project GLAD®'s Picture Dictionary supports early learners in vocabulary development and word study skills.

I find that the areas that are lacking in most curricula are: a vast library of decodable texts aligned to a phonics program, culturally diverse texts to use for read-alouds, visual supports for learning such as anchor charts and realia, and thoughtful adaptations for my language learners and students with IEPs.

—continued on page 13—



—continued from page 9—

I saw that I could elevate texts from SAVVAS myView Literacy by using their read-aloud texts (very short stories presented to students orally with no visuals) to do Listen & Sketch (a GLAD® Reading and Writing strategy) with my students, as well as making them into Narrative Input Charts (an Input strategy). This allowed students visual support to accompany all texts, made the readings more interactive, and supported more dialogue in our classroom as we discussed each text.

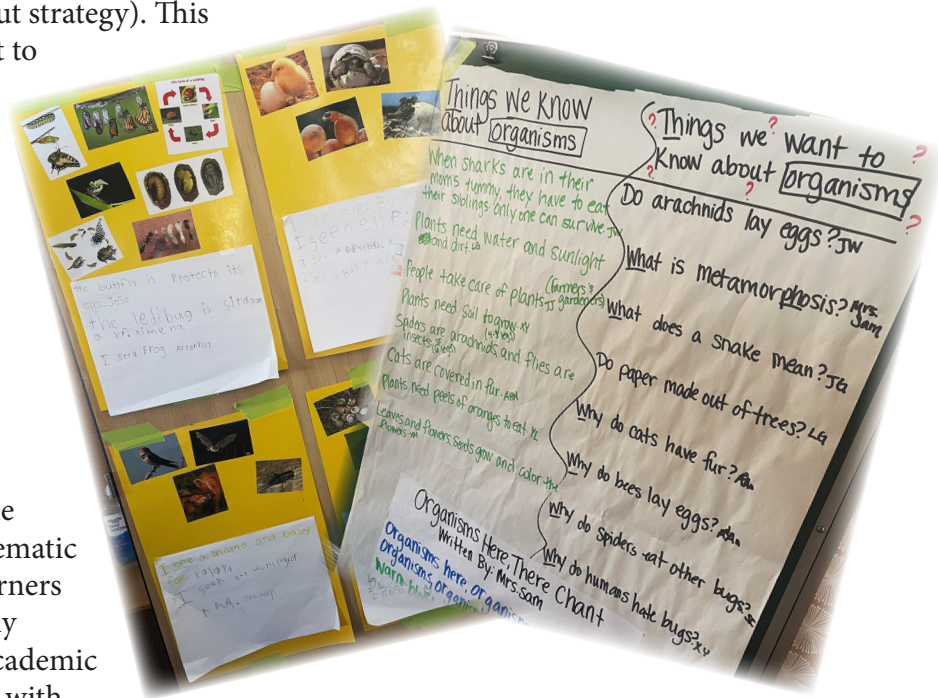
Guiding Question #4:
Which GLAD® strategies can I implement with little to no prep to get me started?

Now we have finally reached the “how” of planning an entire thematic unit that is beneficial for all learners in our classrooms, but especially those learning English in the academic setting. The thought of starting with a whole new thematic unit can feel overwhelming, to say the least. For the remainder of this article, I will outline the GLAD® strategies that I find the quickest and easiest to start implementing, so that you can elevate any topic you are currently teaching.

Focus & Motivation strategies serve to spark interest in the unit of study, set a purpose for learning, and assess students’ prior knowledge.

- ✓ Observation Charts - An activity that encourages students to talk with a partner as they observe, make predictions, and ask questions of topic-related images and realia.
- ✓ Inquiry Chart - a natural extension of the Observation Charts—an interactive chart that asks students what they know about the topic of study and what they would like to learn that is revisited often to correct errors, answer questions, add newly learned information, and deepen students’ understanding of the topic.

- ✓ Cognitive Content Dictionary (CCD) and Picture Dictionary - A strategy that introduces academic vocabulary, one word at a time, related to a unit of study and teaches word-study skills comprehensibly.



Observation Charts encourage students to talk with a partner about topic-related images. Then, they are better able to articulate what they know and what they hope to learn.

Input Strategies are direct teaching strategies for key topic understanding as outlined in the standards. These are the strategies that allow you to pack in vocabulary and information through visuals and discourse to process all that you are presenting.

- ✓ Graphic Organizer Input Chart - a color-coded graphic organizer that outlines the big ideas of the unit made comprehensible with repetition of key vocabulary and images, created and presented in front of the students.
- ✓ Pictorial Input Chart - a chart that consists of a central image key to the unit theme with color-coded categories of information in bulleted format, made comprehensible with repetition of key vocabulary and concepts, and sketches, created and presented in front of the students.

—continued on page 14—



—continued from page 13—



Project GLAD® Input Strategies are color-coded, highly visual charts created in front of the students.

- ✓ Narrative Input Chart - a way to present a narrative text related to the unit of study in an interactive format that includes turn and talks, vocabulary and conversation bubble review, and extension activities.

Guided Oral Practice strategies provide students with multiple and varied opportunities to engage in academic talk using topic-related vocabulary with classmates.

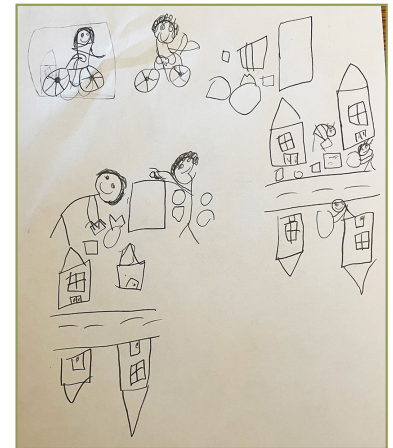
- ✓ Chants & DLeNM's Chant Bank - chants, poems, raps, and songs are written to include key concepts and language that provide students with a fun and engaging way to learn new content. DLeNM's Chant Bank is a free resource of chants and songs uploaded by teachers from across the country covering multiple content areas and grade levels, in English and Spanish (visit dlenm.org and find the link in the drop-down menu for Resources).

- ✓ Sentence Patterning Chart - an interactive and engaging strategy to teach students sentence formation, correct syntax, and parts of speech. Follows the Here, There Chant organically as you pull vocabulary from the chant.

Reading & Writing strategies provide students with comprehensible, modeled, and guided support.

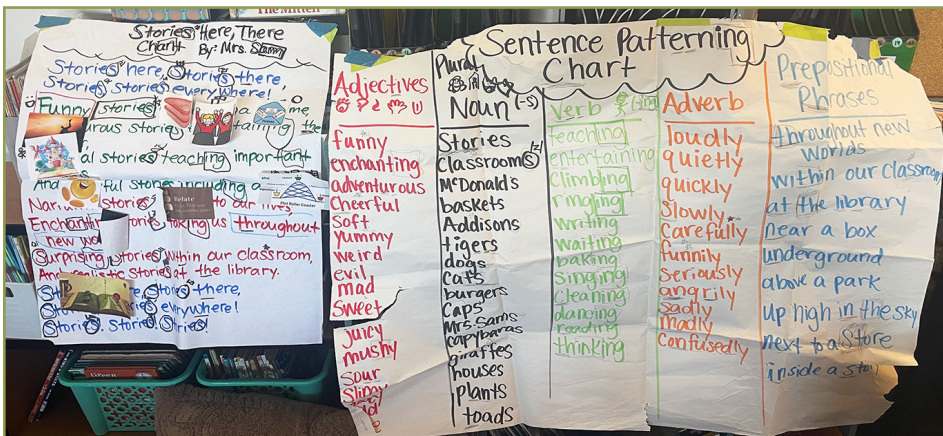
- ✓ Listen & Sketch is a strategy that develops visualization and comprehension and promotes active listening.

In the Listen and Sketch strategy, the teacher pauses during a read-aloud to give students a chance to sketch what they visualize as they hear the story.



Whether you are new to the world of Project GLAD® or a practitioner, it can be overwhelming when so many resources are given to you. It is really helpful to combat those feelings by revisiting units you have already created. Once you have looked at where you've been, the guiding questions above are a great way to reflect on where you would like to go next. After some reflection, selecting key GLAD® strategies, like the ones outlined above, will help you meet your students' needs while keeping them engaged in the important content you are tasked with.

I think it is important to remember that teaching should be an enjoyable process. We can make it that way by trying new strategies and methods, making mistakes, collaborating, tinkering, and therefore re-energizing our practices.



The Here There Chant and the Sentence Patterning Chart support students in learning high-level vocabulary, proper sentence structure, and parts of speech in a fun and engaging way.

