



# TEACHING WITH THEMES

If you've ever planned a sequence of art projects, you know how much thought goes into building skills over time. But even with that care, students don't always see how everything connects—or why their work matters. Theme-based teaching can shift this!

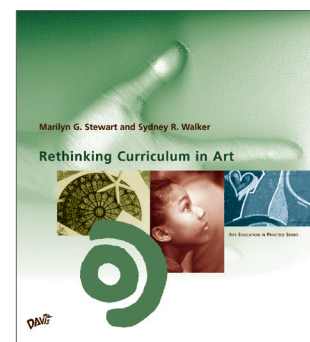
By centering lessons around Big Ideas like identity, community, or environment, students have something to explore, not just something to make. Suddenly, students aren't just making art to complete an assignment, they're exploring something that connects to their lives. And that changes the energy in the room. Projects start to connect, skills build more naturally, and students begin to see art as a way to express ideas, not just complete assignments.

It's a simple shift, but when students have something to say, the work becomes more meaningful—for both students and teachers.



## WHAT ARE BIG IDEAS?

If you've explored theme-based teaching, you've likely come across Big Ideas or concepts that connect learning over time. Davis author, Marilyn Stewart describes these as "enduring ideas". In *Rethinking Curriculum in Art*, part of Davis's Art Education in Practice Series, she explains that these ideas go beyond any single lesson—or even a single subject. They're the kinds of concepts that naturally connect across disciplines and stay relevant over time. You might call them themes, key ideas, or even essential questions—but the goal is the same. These are the big, umbrella concepts that invite students to think about what it means to be human, to live in a community, and to understand the world around them.





## WHAT ARE BIG IDEAS? (CONTINUED)

What makes these ideas so powerful in the art room is how naturally they connect to what artists have always done. Throughout cultures and history, people have used art to explore shared experiences, questions, and emotions. When students engage with those same kinds of ideas, their work becomes part of that larger conversation. In that way, theme-based teaching isn't just a strategy, it's a way of helping students connect their own thinking to the broader human experience.

Big Ideas in art don't come out of nowhere—they're drawn from the same places artists (and people in general) have always found meaning. **At their core, Big Ideas come from the human experience and can be understood as extensions of Dr. Ernest Boyer's concept of human commonalities**, shared human experiences such as identity, storytelling, community, and our relationship with the world, which provide a foundation for meaningful, connected learning across time, cultures, and disciplines. As the President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Dr. Boyer (1928-1995) wrote and researched extensively about teaching in a culturally diverse world. He identified eight common experiences in the lives of humans. Though the Universal Human Commonalities are often paraphrased and presented in different order, they essentially state that we all:

While the human commonalities provide a rich topic for inquiry, learning and creating, other suggestions for Big Ideas include:

- Identity
- Survival
- Conflict
- Spirituality
- Fantasy
- Power
- Rites of Passage
- Change
- Ritual
- Celebration
- Heroes
- Ancestry



### ▪ Experience life cycles

All people share the universal experience of birth, growth, and death.

### ▪ Work

All people produce and consume.

### ▪ Use symbols

All people use symbols to express feelings and ideas.

### ▪ Know time and place

All people have the capacity to recall the past and anticipate the future.

### ▪ Search for a larger purpose

All people attempt to give meaning and direction to their lives.

### ▪ Have an aesthetic response

All people respond to beauty.

### ▪ Seek social bonding

All people are members of groups and institutions that shape their lives.

### ▪ Have a connection to nature

All people are connected to the natural world.



# WHY IT WORKS ACROSS K-12

One of the best things about teaching with themes is how flexible it is. A kindergartener and a high school student can both explore the same theme, just at very different levels. For younger students, it might look like drawing people and places they know. For older students, it might turn into more complex, idea-driven work. Either way, they're building skills and understanding at the same time.

To illustrate the use of a theme across grade levels, **let's look at Communication as a Big Idea/theme throughout Davis programs.**

**Unit 3 Introduction**

## Colorful Stories

How do we tell stories?

**People use their imaginations to tell each other stories.**

Artists often tell stories in the artworks they make. They mix paint to make different colors. They mix paint to make colors dark or light.

1 Melissa Iwai, *Red Paper*, 2015.

**Who seems happy in this picture?**

2 Melissa Iwai, *Tolly*.

**What is happening in this picture?**

**Meet Melissa Iwai**  
Melissa Iwai is a writer and illustrator of books for children.

Unit 3 Colorful Stories 43

Explorations in Art, Grade 1, Student Edition—Unit 3.

**Unit 3 Introduction**

## Stories

Where do we find stories in our lives?

1 Jacob Lawrence, *Harriet and the Promised Land: Through Forests, Through Rivers, Up Mountains*, 1957. Courtesy and permission on loan.

**What is happening in this picture? How do you know?**

**Meet Jacob Lawrence**  
Jacob Lawrence made pictures to tell stories. He wanted people to know about things that really happened. Before he painted his pictures, he spent a lot of time reading from the past. He was interested in the history of African Americans.

Unit 3 Stories 43

Explorations in Art, Grade 3, Student Edition—Unit 3.

**Unit 3 Introduction**

## Stories

Why are stories important in our lives?

1 Judith Schaeffer, *Hour Accident*, 2015. Stained glass.

**What do you think this artwork is about?**

**Meet Judith Schaeffer**  
Judith Schaeffer is known for her work with stained glass. Her pieces often exhibit elements of storytelling. The detailed and exaggerated faces and figures have a cartoon-like quality. The medium of stained glass has long been associated with illustrating stories.

**Why are stories important in our lives?**

Stories were often a series of connected pictures or frames. This method of linking scenes together led to popular ways of telling stories that we still use today, as in comics.

Artists help us share stories with others. The images that artists create can convey messages, amuse, shock, persuade, and inform. They remind us of what we have in common with others as well as our cultural differences. They are also a way for us to remain connected to the past.

Unit 3 Stories 43

Explorations in Art, Grade 6, Student Edition—Unit 3.

**1 Messages**

How do people communicate through art and design?

1 Yinka Shonibare, *Unruly Women*, 2005. Courtesy of the artist and the Yinka Shonibare C/O Davies Projects.

**Unit at a Glance**

**Essential Question**  
How do people communicate through art and design?

**What You Will Learn**

- How art and design are forms of communication.
- How artists and designers use color to convey information, ideas, and feelings.
- How traditions in painting as a form of expression continue and change.
- How an artist refers to the history of art and society to communicate important ideas about the present.

**Key Terms**

**English**  
artistic  
artwork  
art project  
color palette  
color scheme  
color theory  
composition  
contrast  
design  
designer  
design process  
design thinking  
designer's intent  
designer's message  
designer's purpose  
designer's vision  
designer's work  
designer's style  
designer's voice  
designer's identity  
designer's personality  
designer's character  
designer's spirit  
designer's soul  
designer's heart  
designer's mind  
designer's body  
designer's soul

**Spanish**  
artístico  
obra de arte  
proyecto artístico  
paleta de colores  
esquema de colores  
teoría del color  
composición  
contraste  
diseño  
diseñador  
proceso de diseño  
pensamiento de diseño  
mensaje del diseñador  
propósito del diseñador  
visión del diseñador  
trabajo del diseñador  
estilo del diseñador  
voz del diseñador  
identidad del diseñador  
personalidad del diseñador  
carácter del diseñador  
espíritu del diseñador  
alma del diseñador  
corazón del diseñador  
mente del diseñador  
cuerpo del diseñador  
alma del diseñador

**Meet Yinka Shonibare**  
Yinka Shonibare is known for artworks that are visually attractive, often due to his use of brightly colored patterned fabric. The artist also likes to surprise his audience with unusual combinations of objects that cause them to think. Referring to previous time in the past, his artworks help viewers better understand the present.

Unit 1 Messages 29

Experience Art, Grades 7–8, Student Edition—Unit 1.

**5 Sharing Ideas through Value, Color, Space, and Texture**

Chapter at a Glance

**Essential Question**  
How do value, color, space, and texture enable artists to communicate ideas and tell stories?

**You Will Learn**

- How artists vary hue, value, and intensity to create many different effects in artwork.
- How space and elements interact in dynamic ways.
- The different kinds of texture that can be displayed in a work of art.

**Key Terms**

**English**  
hue  
value  
intensity  
color palette  
color scheme  
color theory  
composition  
contrast  
design  
designer  
design process  
design thinking  
designer's intent  
designer's message  
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designer's spirit  
designer's soul  
designer's heart  
designer's mind  
designer's body  
designer's soul

**Spanish**  
tono  
valor  
intensidad  
paleta de colores  
esquema de colores  
teoría del color  
composición  
contraste  
diseño  
diseñador  
proceso de diseño  
pensamiento de diseño  
mensaje del diseñador  
propósito del diseñador  
visión del diseñador  
trabajo del diseñador  
estilo del diseñador  
voz del diseñador  
identidad del diseñador  
personalidad del diseñador  
carácter del diseñador  
espíritu del diseñador  
alma del diseñador  
corazón del diseñador  
mente del diseñador  
cuerpo del diseñador  
alma del diseñador

**Chapter at a Glance**

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**1.7** RESPONDING TO ART: ART ON THE WALL: SCENES OF ABOU BY YINKA SHONIBARE page 32

**1.8** STUDIO: Picturing Value page 34

**1.9** STUDIO: Interacting Color: Harmonies page 38

**1.10** STUDIO: Drawing with Linear Perspective page 42

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**1.12** STUDIO: Actual Texture: Transformations page 50

**1.13** STUDIO: Printing Implied Texture page 54

**1.14** STUDIO: REPRESENTATION: Creating a Collection That Changes with Context page 58

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Unit 5 Sharing Ideas through Value, Color, Space, and Texture 3

The Visual Experience, Grades 9–12, Student Edition—Unit 5.





## WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

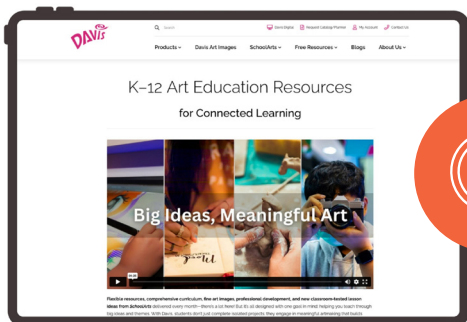
As students build knowledge and develop skills in art they begin to recognize how deeply it is woven into their everyday lives. They discover that **creating and responding to art isn't separate from their experiences, it's an essential part of how they understand the world.** This realization is at the heart of Davis programs, and the pathway to it is through Big Ideas.

Using *Experience Art* (grades 7-8) as an example, notice that the theme of Unit 1 is Messages (see product spread on page 3). The unit opens with an Essential Question related to this theme, "How do people communicate through art and design?" The idea is addressed by showing ways that people around the world have used art to communicate and by providing students with opportunities to create their own messages through art.

A wide range of images illustrates the many ways people communicate ideas and emotions. Concepts connected to communication—such as Messages—are explored through a series of lessons that blend thematic content with hands-on artmaking. Together, these experiences build on one another, extending the Big Idea from multiple perspectives and supporting students in developing a deeper understanding.

The flexible design of Davis programs empowers you to choose themes that best align with your students' interests and needs, connect to your school or community, or make the most of available resources and materials. Whatever theme you choose, Essential Questions and thoughtfully sequenced lessons provide meaningful entry points for exploring Big Ideas from multiple perspectives. Students will discover how these Big Ideas come to life through artworks from across cultures and time periods, while engaging with diverse artistic approaches and traditions. Along the way, they'll take a closer look at the practices of contemporary artists whose work brings these themes into focus.

Even if students aren't formally introduced to all the themes across Davis programs, a theme-based approach will help them gain an appreciation of how **Big Ideas about art, design, and visual culture can reveal complex and interesting connections with their own experience in the world.** If you're looking for a way to bring more connection, depth, and flexibility into your teaching, it's worth exploring how a theme-based curriculum from Davis Publications can support that shift.



**Explore Davis theme-based materials for connected learning.**

[DavisArt.com/k-12-art-education-resources](https://davisart.com/k-12-art-education-resources)