Conceptual Teaching: Chapter 4 – Georgia Department of Education

Intro: Now that you've selected themes and created enduring understanding for those themes, the next step is to design a plan to connect those themes to students at the beginning of the course. This is why Unit 1 is so critical. Most teachers have asked their students, at one time or another, if they remember discussing some previous topic and many students won't remember. The idea behind Unit 1 in all social studies courses is to engage students' prior understandings with the themes that will be discussed throughout the course. This means creating a first unit that teaches the terminology in enduring understandings and allows students to make connection in their own lives or community. The traditional practice of handing out vocabulary lists and reading the first chapter on day one needs to be reconsidered. Instead, engage in a dialogue with the students and do some activities where students have the opportunity to demonstrate what they already understand about the connecting themes. When Unit 1 is complete, students should understand all components of the enduring understandings, give personal examples of each of the ones you intend to use, and connect a piece of content to one or more of the enduring understandings. Let's see what this looks like in practice.

Connecting the theme to student experiences

Cannon: Who plans on going to college? Alright, Jasmine, why?

Jasmine: 'Cause I think I'll be more successful if I have a college education.

Cannon: Okay. You think you'd make more money?

Jasmine: Yes.

Cannon: Maybe get a better job?

Jasmine: Yeah.

Cannon: So it'd be good for you long term?

Jasmine: Yes.

Cannon: Okay. Now what is the government in the state of Georgia done to help students go to college?

Jasmine: Enforce grants and scholarships.

Cannon: Do you know one by name by any chance?

Jasmine: The Hope Scholarship.

Cannon: The Hope Scholarship. Now what is the Hope Scholarship?

Jasmine: It's a scholarship given to – I think it's just Georgia's kids that maintain a certain grade point average or numeric average.

Cannon: And they pay for you to go to college right?

Jasmine: Yes.

Cannon: Now why would the government want you to go to college?

Jasmine: Maybe to push you to work harder in school.

Cannon: And when you graduate from college, you are better prepared for the workforce, right?

Jasmine: Yes.

Cannon: Now you mentioned something about the GPA. Why would the government have a GPA component to the Hope Scholarship? Why would they want you to keep your GPA at a certain level?

Jasmine: Maybe, so, more people would push to have a higher GPA and have a better chance to get into better schools.

Cannon: Steven, you wanted to comment on that?

Steven: I was just going to say that, uh, the government may want you to have a GPA so that they don't spend their money or waste their money on people that they know aren't going to finish or aren't going to pursue their goals.

Cannon: Right. So, what's the belief here? What's the belief of the government? They believe that if we spend money on education then...?

Steven: More people. I believe that they think if they spend more money on education then more students will pursue education and try to be more successful in life.

Cannon: Good. Derrick, you had a comment?

Derrick: Well, like Steven was saying, I would say maybe like if like the government spend money on students that want to learn maybe the ones that don't want to learn will change their thought about they'll want to learn just like everyone else and the government will see that they can do this all state-wide and not just at one state or two states or three.

Cannon: Well, good. So what we take from this then is the fact that you want to go to college cause you think it'll better you in the future. So that's a belief you have, right? I believe that if I go to college, I'll get a better job, I'll make more money in the future. And you think that could actually lead to more students wanting the same thing, right? So here we have the government making a decision – and they give away a lot of money, right? I mean, college is expensive. So the government's going to give away a lot of money based on a belief. Alright. So that's an economic decision, you follow me? Based on a belief. Better – people that want to go to college so there'll be a better workforce therefore we are going to spend money on it. Yes, Derrick.

Derrick: As well as a belief wouldn't it be an idea? If they didn't do it yet?

Cannon: Belief. Ideal. And I'm going to use the term belief and ideal as kind of synonymous today. Good. Who in here has ever done some kind of volunteer work? Okay, Caitlin what kind of volunteer – or what group were you working with when you volunteered?

Caitlin: Um, usually elementary school aged kids.

Cannon: Okay, well who was doing the volunteering? Was it a church group or a school group?

Caitlin: Um, it's my school group for Beta Club.

Cannon: For Beta Club. And you said you were helping elementary school?

Caitlin: Yes.

Cannon: And what were you doing?

Caitlin: We usually play learning games or computer games or just reading stuff.

Cannon: Why that group?

Caitlin: They're just easier to get along with. They want to learn more.

Cannon: What's the importance of helping them learn and helping them with education?

Caitlin: It's usually classes like after-school for the kids that struggle during school.

Cannon: Okay, so what's the belief behind that? If you help them while they're struggling what's that going to do for them in the future?

Caitlin: Become better and just want to learn more and they won't struggle as much.

Cannon: And how does that help?

Caitlin: It helps them be able to get into college and just go farther.

Cannon: How much time do you spend volunteering?

Caitlin: Um, well we have to have 20 – 25 hours a year. And usually just a couple of hours at a time.

Cannon: Okay. Now is that 25 hours you could use doing something else?

Caitlin: Yes.

Cannon: But you choose to volunteer, right?

Caitlin: [inaudible] Right.

Cannon: So you're making a decision in this case. In this case you're taking up time so you're making a social decision based on a belief that you need to help the elementary kids with their reading, right?

Caitlin: Right.

Cannon: Right. Does that make sense to everybody else? Has anyone ever, uh, changed a decision or a belief after talking to somebody, after getting advice from somebody? Nicole, what kind of situation were you in?

Nicole: Well, I was going to buy a shirt and my mom told me it was too expensive so I ended up not getting the shirt. But then later I found it at a different store for a cheaper price.

Cannon: Okay. So, were you mad originally that you couldn't buy the shirt?

Nicole: Very.

Cannon: Because you didn't think you would get it again, right?

Nicole: Yes.

Cannon: But it turned out it would've been a mistake to buy the shirt, right?

Nicole: Yes.

Cannon: Right. Now why did you give your mom's advice so much weight? Why did that matter to you?

Nicole: Well, she kinda made me.

Cannon: She kinda made you, so she exerted force, right? And that happens sometimes in government. You have people that exert force on others just because they think they know better. Now it turns out in this case she was right.

Nicole: Yes.

Cannon: Is she always right?

Nicole: Well, no.

Cannon: [laughter] It's okay to say no. Um, anybody else have any comments on that one? Alright, so what we had then, you had somebody with more experience with shopping – would you say your mom has more experience shopping than you do? – giving you advice on a shopping tip and that turned out to be the correct advice. What you're going to see in government is that that happens a lot. We have government decisions that are made that are based on previous government decisions or prior documents that were written long before our government was around that, actually, have turned out to be correct. And sometimes we try to do things in government that don't work out so well, for example and we're going to talk about something later on called the Articles of Confederation and how we tried to do it on our own, we tried to go out and buy that shirt we thought we could do it; we thought we were being really smart, but, uh, in the end it turns out it wasn't really the best way to do it. And what we had to do was we had to go back and get advice from people who had structured governments long

before we had. Has anyone ever tried to change something at school, like a pep rally or a location or price of prom tickets? Steven?

Steven: Yes, I actually tried to, uh, change, get my schedule changed cause I wasn't satisfied with the class they had scheduled me for.

Cannon: Now how did you go about doing that?

Steven: Well, at first, I went down to the counselor's office myself to see if I could get it changed but they said you had to sign up on this – on the log in sheet and then they would call you down individually.

Cannon: Okay.

Steven: And they were taking too long and by that time school was already progressing, so therefore, I ended up telling my mother about it and she actually came up here to help me get it changed.

Cannon: Okay, now why did you feel like your schedule needed to be changed in the first place?

Steven: Well because I wasn't satisfied with the class or the teacher that, you know, that was teaching and I didn't feel that I would actually learn the material that I needed to be taught in class.

Cannon: Okay. Let me go back a second. You said your mom actually eventually had to get involved. Now why did you feel that was a necessary step to take?

Steven: Well, because, I feel that the counselor's wouldn't listen to my voice so that I felt that, I felt that they would listen to my parent's voice – my mother's voice.

Cannon: Why would they give your mother more weight or more credit than they would give you?

Steven: Well, because she's actually an adult too and they're – adults usually listen to adults more than they would listen to children.

Cannon: Okay. That's perfect. So let's look at this. In this case, a decision was to what? What was your decision?

Steven: To change my schedule.

Cannon: To change your schedule. And it was actually two kinda decisions going on here. Right, and then you decided to get your mom involved. I'll just say mom. Now what was the belief causing you to want to get your schedule changed?

Steven: That I would, that I wouldn't learn the material that was being taught in class.

Cannon: So wouldn't learn as much? You felt like? And what was your belief, what was your idea, what were you thinking when you decided to get mom involved?

Steven: That they would actually listen to what she had to say instead of how they weren't listening to me.

Cannon: Okay. Anybody else have a comment on this one? Alright, now this is absolutely perfect because when we talk about government, especially when we talk about interest groups, anybody ever heard that term interest groups? When we talk about interest groups later on this year, this is what interest groups are all about. It's hard sometimes for a legislator or for a senator or a representative to listen to just me or to just you. They have a lot of people they represent, but if we can get an interest group involved, in this case your mom is an interest group, they'll listen because it's a louder voice, right? It's a more legitimate voice. Interest groups have time and money. They can research. They know the issues. So when an interest group goes to a legislator and they say that we want this particular bill passed. They're much more likely to do it. Did your schedule change after your mom got involved?

Steven: Yes.

Cannon: But not before then, right? So the same thing. We have this belief. In this case your belief was the administrators, the counselors, would listen more to an adult than they would to just me. We can change that around a little bit and there's a belief in government that legislators will listen more to a large group of people than just an individual. Does that make sense? So we have beliefs affecting our decisions. I decided to get Mom involved because they would listen to her more. Same thing with the schedule change. I had this belief that I wouldn't learn as much, or you had this belief in this case. I'm not gonna learn as much. This is not gonna be beneficial for me. Policy needs to be changed. So, we need to make some changes. Our beliefs affect our decisions. Starting to see this? Starting to click for you? Good. Now that we've looked at beliefs and ideas on a personal level and we've talked about some of the decisions you guys have made, what I want to do now is take that and make it a little bit bigger, broader, something we can use in government through the whole course. So if you would, open up your notebooks and on that first page you'll see a chart that looks very similar to the one on the board. And it's got our five themes on it – the five connecting themes that I told you about earlier. And those are the only five things you really really have to focus on for this course cause everything I teach you is going to be part of one of these five. But it's not enough just to say beliefs and ideals, there's obviously something I want you to understand about beliefs and ideals, alright? So what that's going to be called is an enduring understanding. Enduring means long term, lasts a long time. And understanding is what I want you to understand. So that's what we're going to write here. What is it about beliefs and ideals that I want you to understand for a long term? Does that make sense? So, here's what I want you to put in that first box. The beliefs and ideals of a society influence social, economic, and political decisions of that society. The beliefs and ideals of a society, what they think to be true, like Nicole said earlier, what they believe is true, affect or influence their social decisions, their economic decisions, and their political decisions. Which groups do we volunteer to help is based on who we think needs the help, right? Whether or not we go to college, or whether or not we want to go to college, is based on how much value we place on that. Right? When we decide not to buy a shirt or to change something we've already worked on it's based on a belief we have that somebody has better advice, somebody who's been there. Does that make sense? So, the beliefs and ideals of a society influence the social, economic, and political decisions and that's going to keep coming up throughout the whole course.

Conclusion: Here, Mr. Cannon was connecting the theme, in this case beliefs and ideals, with things students were familiar with. This is critical to conceptual teaching. For students to really use the themes

they need to realize that they already know and understand quite a bit about these themes and the teacher is simply expanding on them. If you're lucky enough to get students who are acclimated to the themes and are adept at using them, then you can go deeper into their meanings.

[Using Common Themes

- *Conceptual teaching works best when systems make a conscious decision to use the same themes and enduring understandings between grade levels and courses.]*

This is why we have encouraged systems to develop common themes for all of their courses.