In this chapter, we reflect on the past, consider the present and develop conversations of the future. Previous chapters emphasised that activities and experiences defined by traditional school “subjects” can be drawn upon to promote life-long learning and decision making in a sustainable way: “Instruction begins when you, the teacher, learn from the learner; put yourself in their place so that you may understand … what they learn and the ways in which they understand it” (Soren Kierkegaard [1813–1855], cited in Breen, 2005, p. 4). Our aim in this chapter is to provide teachers with a flexible and responsive framework within which to facilitate and assess an inclusive inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning within the context of education for sustainability (EfS). Across all learning areas (LAs), students need to make personal decisions that will direct their actions and inquiries about the issues they consider of personal relevance as learners. To be successful, this process requires some connectedness between the learner’s existing knowledge/experience, the new knowledge/experience gleaned from lesson(s), and real situations where this new knowledge has been, or can be, applied.

We also, in this chapter, present two scenarios that show how you, the teacher, can utilise an inquiry-based approach to effectively meet a range of syllabus objectives and outcomes as they relate to learning associated with sustainability issues. The scenarios cover the planning process and are designed to prompt you to consider the interrelationships between the components of the process holistically. Each scenario highlights different approaches to preparing and conducting theme-based or thematic units, and points out how the processes involved can be constructed to reflect real-life sustainability issues across several LA contexts. When students can make connections between classroom learning and real-life issues, that learning is consolidated and reinforced through meaning they find relevant.

The framework we outline here explores the interaction between components concerning curriculum integration (with reference to the curriculums of both Australia and New Zealand), project management, pedagogy, activity selection, engagement, stimulus and assessment. Negotiation is central to the framework and likely to be of significant value to teachers, other school staff, students, parents and community members in terms of promoting an interactive, cooperative and respectful educational experience.

**TEACHING EFS THROUGH INQUIRY-BASED THEMATIC UNITS**

EfS, by its very nature, has no “subject” boundary. A cross-curricular approach to teaching and learning assists in avoiding compartmentalising knowledge, skills and attitudes; and it takes into account key aspects of relevant subjects. This approach fits with the teacher’s role of empowering students to seek, identify and consolidate connections between their learning and their actions. The promotion and active support of a climate of teamwork, cooperation and interaction—associated with the shift towards teachers facilitating rather than directing
student learning—is integral and essential to the evolution of inquiry-based approaches, during which students can work individually or in groups of any size and composition.

Inquiry-based learning can be effectively conducted within thematic contexts. These themes allow students to be personally engaged in learning by providing them with opportunities to make decisions about that learning, so facilitating the development of personal responsibility. Lipson, Valencia, Wixson, and Peters (1993, p. 256) described characteristics of thematic activities as follows:

Thematic units capitalize on students’ natural interests; adapt to a wider range of reading and writing abilities; provide more varied activities; and involve students in a variety of whole group, small group, and individual activities that are linked to one another. Because themes last over a longer period of time (one to several weeks), and because they directly involve students in a community of learners, they are advocated as a positive approach to instruction.

By adopting a thematic approach, teachers can help students make meaningful, real-life connections between LAs. Content can be reinforced, the needs and interests of students more ably catered for, and time used more efficiently. Several educational researchers, including Hinde (2005), Lake (1994), and Lewis and Shaha (2003), found that students’ knowledge, engagement and/or attitudes towards learning improved when they were engaged in thematic units.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to teach themes is that, if done well, they empower students to construct meaning relevant to them, and to make connections with other experiences that help consolidate their new understanding. Students derive insight from applying and refining new knowledge, skills and attitudes in response to activities they share with their peers and the wider community. As stated in the New Zealand Curriculum (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 34):

Students learn best when they are able to integrate new learning with what they already understand. When teachers deliberately build on what their students know and have experienced, they maximise the use of learning time, anticipate students’ learning needs, and avoid unnecessary duplication of content. Teachers can help students to make connections across learning areas as well as to home practices and the wider world.

Engaging students in the construction of inquiry-based thematic units thus enables them to see relationships and make connections between ideas and concepts in a broader context. This is a logical extension to the KWL learning cycle (Ogle, 1986): What do I Know? What do I Want to know? How do I know I have Learned? Involving the students in this way provides a stimulus for them (and, importantly, information for the teacher) to identify individual strengths in the area under investigation: in short, there is something to build on. The involvement also asks students to think about—within the context of their own relevance framework—how they might consolidate their knowledge, understanding and skills in the area of investigation under consideration. This engagement not only motivates students but also encourages them to take responsibility for making informed decisions about their own learning.