Explorations in Teaching: Creating an Effective Interdisciplinary Experience

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A democracy cannot leave the conditions for the acquiring of new knowledge and skills, playing with ideas and struggling to understand, reaching tentatively across the divides, feeling the grounded satisfaction of achievement, raging against history, and moving toward clarity and resolution to chance—or for that matter to the vagaries of political climate and market forces. A society that defines itself as free and open is obligated to create and sustain a public space for this kind of education to occur across the broad sweep of its citizenry.

(Rose 7)

Our hallway is buzzing with activity. Two large library carts stand in the hall between our two rooms, each holding about seventy-five reference books. Groups of four students are working around fifteen different tables in our classrooms. “Mrs. Smith, do you know what malaria is?” asks Brandy. “Mrs. Smith, I can’t find Magellan in this book,” wails Jodi. “I need a picture of Henry Hudson and there aren’t any in the books. Can I use your computer?” queries Tom. While I am working with these students, Mrs. Sager is moving around the room as well. She is helping Amanda write a bibliographic citation for the book she just used. She has already helped Scott look up Columbus in the index of three books to find out where the information he needs is found. She will move on soon to help Mike, who has his hand in the air. Jaclyn is reading a log entry for Dana, and Mollie, who knows how to use the photocopier, has gone to the office to copy a picture for someone else. The students are busy, but the atmosphere is relaxed. One student gets up and moves to the cart of trade books. Another goes to the cabinet to find glue. Someone else goes to the classroom across the hall to consult with the other student doing research on the same explorer. Barb and I both glance up, scan the room, and smile at each other. This has been the best year of my teaching career and I’m excited about the difference in the atmosphere within the rooms and in the connections we have made both with the students and with the subject matter. Barb is a history teacher and I am a language arts teacher, but the students seem to have forgotten that. They just ask their questions of whichever one of us is in the right place at the right time. The sense of being a community of learners in our teamed and interdisciplinary classroom is unlike anything I have experienced before.

Getting Started

James Moffett suggests that better education in our classrooms should include responsible decision making by the students and unprogrammed interaction with other people and the environment. “As part of this change, I would drop textbooks in favor of tradebooks, a syllabus in favor of a classroom library, and go strongly for individual and small-group reading” (Moffett 29). He also suggests integration of the curriculum. Another improvement our middle school is researching is “middle school concept” and team teaching. Barb and I attended conferences and came back very excited. Our school improvement committee also visited middle schools transitioning or operating within these parameters. So, teaming seemed like a great idea last year when the principal was scheduling in March and April. “Why not?” Barb and I asked each other. After all, we had done an interdisciplinary
Working With What We Had

Meanwhile, in the office, the two-hour blocks were formed and the two of us were assigned to teach the same 110-120 eighth grade students in back-to-back time slots of fifty minutes each with a five minute break in between them. Then we began to consider what resources we would need. Project-driven classrooms need a large amount and a wide variety of art supplies as well as some craft items. We would also need resource books not available from our library. For eight units, we projected that it would cost us about $2000 to order these books and supplies. But it was Barb's year to order texts, and we felt that it would be worth the savings to the district because her texts would have cost roughly $9000. So, we sent a proposal to the principal for the resources and he okayed them. A list of resource books had been provided with the "Living History" package when it came, but Barb had decided to wait to order them until she knew what parts of the new curriculum she would be using. We wanted to tailor our resources to the specific projects we had in mind. Of course, waiting meant taking a chance. By the time we knew what to order (September), funds were not available due to a mix-up; so we had the teacher's manual but none of the student resources. What a way to begin!

We decided to jump right into it anyway by tailoring the exploration and colonization units to utilize the books already available in a combination of the middle school library, the high school library, and the public library, a variety of English and social studies textbooks, and those tradebooks from our own personal collections. Our principal tried to help by giving us what money he could. We used it to purchase twenty-five resource books on Native American culture, a couple of general history CDs, and a Native American music tape, along with some posters for hall displays. We found specific books on art, religion, cooking, housing, warriors, tools, and medicines, as well as general books on Native American culture. Because we shopped at a book warehouse outlet, we were able to find age-appropriate books with plenty of color and interesting-looking artifacts. We also found books with smaller sections of text that held lots of information, but that broke this information down so it was not as intimidating as many reference books in libraries are. With this set of books and those we had from last year for the revolution unit, we had resources for the first four of eight units. We decided to go ahead with our plans and find funding along the way. We made an appeal to the Superintendent and applied for six different grants, four of which were successful. In addition, our classes had made a quilt during our Revolutionary War unit last year that could be raffled for "seed"
money for this year's quilt and craft supply items. The next step was to begin documenting what we saw happening on a daily or weekly basis. This would allow us to consider more easily what the pros, cons, stumbling blocks, and rewards had been. It would open a dialogue for us, so I kept a weekly journal of all the insights we had, the things that worked really well, and the things that failed miserably. We also kept running lists of things we needed to order for next year, or that we needed to reconsider for next year. It wasn't long before patterns began to emerge. Some things we knew from the research we read before we started. Other insights came with experience.

**Larger Classes and Longer Class-Times Necessitate a Change in Teaching Style**

All students facing forward quietly and taking notes is unlikely to happen for long stretches of time, particularly at middle school level. That means that it is important to our mental health and to our students motivation, to keep lecturing to a minimum. Mini-lessons seem to work best for our students' retention as well as for classroom control. If these lessons can be done at the beginning of the hour or just after a break, it works out best for us. We find ourselves doing a lot of individual instruction while moving around from student to student, which not only helps us check individual understanding but also helps the students maintain focus. The fact that we are physically closer to the students (sometimes even sitting at each table for a portion of each day) gives them the opportunity to ask more questions without risking so much, and that makes our teaching more individual. It also makes our relationship with the students more personal. Rather than this closeness to students being uncomfortable, it makes the classroom a more satisfying place for all of us. However, the days of correcting papers, filling in grade books, or creating lesson plans during the class hour while the students are working is a thing of the past (for those who were used to it).

**Discipline is not a Large Issue**

We have had a minimum of discipline problems to deal with in this classroom environment. First, the students are happier with what they are doing. Each unit contains an over-all project that is very hands-on and creative. Next, the students have begun to take more responsibility for themselves and are even willing to try to motivate and help out other students to some degree. They are insisting on self-control from the class as a whole because it threatens the classroom situation for all of them if some students choose not to cooperate. Many found themselves originally assigned to the half of the block that many of their close friends were not in. When the group works as sixty together instead of thirty and thirty in separate classes, they get to be with those friends. So being in the full group is desirable. Finally, we have deliberately kept the classroom atmosphere more relaxed in the large group. Our relationship with the students is different and the students have more choices.

**Administration Allows More Freedom**

Being given the freedom to choose and blend our own curriculum within the outcomes of the district was one important part of the change. We both firmly believe in using interactive curriculum so the students take an active part in their own learning. Being able to split our 60 morning students and our 60 afternoon students into the best possible groupings based on our knowledge of the students was also important for success. There are always poor combinations of students and when the computer sets up the class lists, it inevitably puts at least six groups of them in one classroom with maniacal glee. We found we could give consideration to the balance of boys and girls (no more classes with 17 boys and 3 girls), of personalities (evening out leaders and followers), of students with special needs, and of ethnic background for a more integrated classroom. Being given the freedom to "flex the blocks" and decide what part of each day will be history and what part language arts, to decide how long students will go before and after a break (within the two assigned periods), and to decide which one of us will teach each lesson (sometimes we cross the departmental barrier!) has made a huge difference for both the students and for us. It's wonderful to be able to finish something important even though the bell has rung, or to be able to teach a history lesson that I am really interested in even though I am the language arts teacher. We are truly making the decisions in our own corner of the world and we feel more empowered than ever before.

**Strengths are Utilized**

Our students seem to be developing a respect for the abilities of each other. As we show good work, talk about what makes it good, and recognize the student or students involved, the students are given a chance to shine. The group projects they do allow them all to take a part in doing something that they can do well while raising their level of interest, utilizing the social aspect so important to middle schoolers, and teaching group problem solving/cooperation. Students who are poor writers, for instance, may contribute art or music to a project presentation and gain recognition for their talents. At the same time, through cooperation in the research, revisions, and editing of the major part of
the group activity, the students are learning to improve their writing ability and their understanding of the history content. While all of this is happening, they are also learning to rely on each other instead of only on the teacher. The students begin to take their work to students who did well on something similar and ask for their help or approval. Believe it or not, most of the students work harder than they would have had they worked alone, but they feel like they did less because several people shared the load.

From a purely teacher's perspective, we each can do what we do best, and we tend to learn from each other. For example, I organize things easily and don't mind record keeping, but not living in the community makes me an outsider as far as some of the parents are concerned. They approach Barb much more easily in the grocery store, on the street, or on the phone at night. They are much less comfortable with me. She also has the community connections to get speakers, buy things at a discount or get donations, or to know where not to step. However, we both can mediate with parents and students for each other when the need arises. And if one of us works better than the other with a student, we can be flexible about who helps that student when the need arises. We feel the support of a peer and can be more relaxed.

Motivation/Grades are Higher (and more Reflective of Real Knowledge)

Fewer students fail our classes than ever before. We find it easier to give extra help after school because we both do not have to be at school every night for an extra hour. We can cover each other, assured that the other person knows exactly what is going on. We can also support each other in the stand with our students that "good enough" is NOT good enough. With assignments counting in both classes sometimes, it is easier to motivate students to consider a paper a work-in-progress and to go back and redo less-than-average assignments. Students tend to put more effort into their papers and projects when they realize that one paper is all that is required for two classes, instead of two research papers being due within a week of each other.

Students Take More Risks

The students are more at ease in a close-knit classroom and will risk public speaking (presentations), taking responsibility, taking an active leadership role, and generally doing things they have never done before. They are more secure. The students have bonded more closely and are closer to us teachers, too. The students seem more confident in their own ability to succeed.

Parents Seem More Satisfied

Most parents say they are impressed with this classroom set up. They like the more personal touch with their students. They like the ease of contacting one of us. They appreciate seeing both of us at once. And they have expressed the feeling that there is more support for their children in an almost grown-up academic world.

Other Considerations

Just as these things are important for team teachers to know and understand, so are the following teacher considerations important:

1. The work load the first year is heavy getting everything coordinated, but should be much better in following years. Then there will be time to experiment and enrich the basic units.

2. Larger groups are harder to get into places. We have trouble scheduling library time but have solved that by providing carts of library books in our classroom area. Field trips may have to be taken in two groups if the full number of students cannot be accommodated.

3. Substitutes have to be carefully chosen unless one of the two teachers is available in the building. We have to look at style and ability to work with someone else. If that cannot be provided for, then we have to put our classes in separate groups to work that day.

4. Sometimes one or the other of us does not get to do exactly what we want to do or get to do something as we are used to doing it. Flexibility is crucial. But negotiation makes working together possible, and what is lost one time is often retrieved another. For instance, at the end of one of our units, my language arts folk-tales about Barb's history characters were completed before the students had finished constructing their colonies for history. By using the entire two-hour block (for a three-day period) to finish them up we ended the unit together at a time convenient for starting the next. We'll pick up the language arts days somewhere else. Everyone wins!

5. Some days the planned activities have to be thrown out and something else done that is more timely or that connects the two classrooms, or that does team building within small groupings which are not working well together. Again, flexibility is important. Things that can feel very "unplanned" at first can be the most memorable lessons of the year.

6. Parents, school board, administration, and other teachers need to be aware of what is happening within the room. Parents need to understand the whole teaming concept, the school board is less uncomfortable with allowing flexibility if they are kept informed of the results of anything out of the ordinary, and administration is much more likely to
The Benefits

The parts of this year that have been the best for us are the motivation that we have felt in this situation to plan creative lessons, the desire to be there every day so we do not miss anything, the feeling of being appreciated by the students, and the realization that what we are doing really matters to our students. And what are our students learning from all of this? At the end of every unit, we have them evaluate what they learned about history, English, and working in groups. These are excerpts from their year-end course evaluations:

New skills I learned were improving my proof-reading skills and editing. I keep building my social skills too. I really learned tolerance this time and leader skills too. I learned the more I exercised my authority as leader, the more people didn’t want to listen and the less they did their work.

I learned when you don’t get along with someone to just ignore their annoying habits and do your work.

It helps us by letting us have responsibility for getting what we were assigned done. One thing you shouldn’t do is make promises you can’t keep.

It helps us a lot because we have to be organized. And I think working in groups helps me because I set goals for myself to have things done by a certain time.

I learned to evaluate what we did. I think it was harder for the people in my group because they had to make the decision if they were going to give me credit or take me out of the group. (He didn’t complete his part of the assignment.) They probably should have. I hurt their grade.

You had to look up everything in the back of books and when you couldn’t find anything there, you would have to go look things up in the computer. This helped me because it forced me to look up and actually read the information to write a good article. We had to write over if it wasn’t good enough but when we put our newspaper together, it was great to see it.

I think it helped us learn about the Revolution better than just reading about it in our textbooks because we got more in-depth information on the people and events and because it was more hands-on than just reading from a book.

The best thing about being in a group is seeing the final product and knowing that working as a team made it all happen.

The rest of the comments made by the group covered how they learned to communicate, to see differences in people and accept others’ ideas as valid, to make better choices of work partners, to meet deadlines so others could meet theirs too, to treat other people as they wanted to be treated, to listen politely, to compromise, to assign work by ability/knowledge, to persuade others to accept their points of view, to trust others to do their parts, to motivate and support others, to think creatively, and to find out that someone they really didn’t think they liked was okay after all. The only real lament we heard was the following: “The hardest thing about working in groups is that I have to work twice as hard to give myself and the rest of the group an above-average grade on that project” (from a student who usually does not complete assigned work).

Barb and I would be the first to admit that this has been an extremely strenuous year for both of us. Neither of us has ever been so worn out. Our principal commented that it is like first year teaching all over again. It’s that and more! We not only had to retrain our own classroom behaviors, but also spent a good portion of the year justifying what we were doing to other staff members. We not only had to write a curriculum to use, but also had to justify its use to school board, parents, administrators, and colleagues. We not only had to be willing to go over and above our “contract requirements,” but also had to be cognizant of anything that would set a precedent. We spent hours finding resources, putting together projects, and planning on the telephone. But I do not remember ever being so committed to my students, so much a part of a learning community, or so at ease with what I am doing in the last fifteen years of my teaching career.

Works Cited

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About the Author
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