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**Teacher Isolation and Disciplinary Literacy: The Difficulties of Interdisciplinary Planning**

Since the elementary classroom’s integrated learning approach abruptly transitions to multiple teachers and separate subject areas in secondary schooling and students’ education never returns to that foundational setup, disconnected learning and a compartmentalized view of knowledge emerge as possible, unintended outcomes. Interdisciplinary instruction between two or more disciplines offers an opportunity to synthesize students’ learning experience in middle school, high school, and college. However, effective interdisciplinary planning requires an important awareness: fitting together is not the same as working together. And due to teachers’ self-chosen and school-supported isolation and common misconceptions about the interdisciplinary approach, cross-curricular collaborations often lead to connections that are rare or only satisfactory. They may only address overarching behavioral or organizational issues, sacrifice disciplinary literacy, dissolve from collaboration into cooperation, juxtapose instead of integrate the disciplines, overshadow a discipline, or begin and end with a book recommendation.

**Differences < Similarities: Downplaying – but Still Expecting – Disciplinary Literacy**

Nowacek (2009) describes individual content areas as “activity systems,” or interactions between a subject (an individual or group of people), an object of attention, and an official or unofficial motive that drives activity, and meditational tools (cultural, discursive, and physical) (p. 494). Although different disciplines can share the terminology for a meditational tool (i.e. thesis paper) yet expect subtly different writing products (i.e. research v. analysis paper), “the tendency is to stress similarities” in interdisciplinary studies so those different writing expectations are often never explicitly communicated to students (Nowacek, 2009, p. 506). Deeming them “perhaps inevitable,” Nowacek (2009) labels the result of this interdisciplinary discrepancy between instruction and assessment as “double binds”: “situations in which individuals experience contradictions within or between activity systems but cannot articulate any meta-awareness of those contradictions” (p. 507).

To ground the concept of “double binds” in real-life, Nowacek (2009) presented a case study of an interdisciplinary unit between three college professors: literature, religious studies, and history. Although all three professors labeled one of their assignments as a “thesis paper” over the course of the interdisciplinary unit, the literature professor wanted students to explicitly form, articulate, and argue about Chaucer (p. 501), the religious studies professor wanted students to summarize and criticize Aquinas’s theology on human salvation (p. 501), and the history professor wanted students to “reason from primary sources by ‘seeing where the evidence leads you’” and work towards an implicit argument (p. 500). Despite these subtle differences that students would need comprehension of in order to successfully adapt their thesis papers for each discipline, “the professors stressed the similarities among their expectations for writing” because “to recognize the difference among the expectations for thesis would be to go against the classroom discourse stressing similarities” (p. 507). For all teaching formats – interdisciplinary or not - it is important to ensure that what one expects to students to do in the assessment is fairly represented in one’s instruction. In the case study, disciplinary literacy is not adequately explained to students, but proficiency is still expected of students in the thesis papers. Students need to direct instruction on the skills of each discipline as much as they need an integrated learning experience. Therefore, interdisciplinary collaboration must treat similarities and differences between disciplines equally.

**Overlooked Prerequisite: Coherence within a Discipline – Especially English**

The foundation of an interdisciplinary study is not its overarching theme, but each teacher’s sense of his or her own discipline. And unfortunately, as an extension of the aforementioned mistake of not explicitly communicating disciplinary differences to students, teachers sometimes enter into interdisciplinary collaborations without a strong sense of differences themselves (or a strong loyalty to differences), so they are open to conforming to and “following” the other discipline with which it is collaborating (Noskin, 1997, p. 59). This passive approach often leads a discipline to forsake its own curriculum, goals, or plans to increase the quantity – but not necessarily the quality – of the interdisciplinary connections made in a unit. And if a subject area in an interdisciplinary study lacks its differentiating characteristics, the study is not technically interdisciplinary. Due to the perceived malleability of the English Language Arts curriculum as opposed to the rigidly structured program to which other subject areas must adhere, English sections of interdisciplinary studies suffer most frequently from a lack of teacher-enforced disciplinary identify. Consequently, English sections often absorb too much of their paired discipline – whether it be history, science, health, etc. – and emerge as a pseudo-English class that’s guided more by the “pressures to make a connection” – a pressure they believe to lie more heavily on them because of the misconception that “since English is so flexible, [it] can work around the other subjects” – than by the instructor’s theoretical knowledge that leads to best fit practices (Noskin, 1997, p. 60).

Explaining that disciplinary “coherence” occurs when a subject area has a “clear and appropriate purpose and accompanying activities that address students’ interest and needs and cultivate students’ emerging literacies” (p. 59), Noskin (1997) argues that without such intrinsic clarity and individual direction, a discipline’s uniqueness becomes vulnerable to mistreatment, oversight, inferiority, or manipulation once it enters interdisciplinary collaboration. While the result of a flexible identify does not always take the the severe form of “blowing off” a subject area to fit another discipline, the seemingly harmless act of “rearranging” a discipline is just as detrimental in that it still uses the other discipline’s “curriculum to substitute as a purpose or guiding force for English” (Noskin, 1997, p. 59, 60). Because the quality of the parts directly influences the quality of the whole in interdisciplinary collaborations, only subject area teachers who have a concrete sense of – and loyalty to – their discipline-specific plans, curriculum, and goals should pursue collaborations.

**The Unfortunate Prevalence of “Egg-Crate” School Structures & Teacher Isolation**

In addition to how teachers perceive their classrooms to be their “personal domains” and, by doing so, confine themselves to their own discipline (DeFour, 2011, p. 57), many administrative policies create the physical conditions for isolation because they don’t require teachers to collaborate (Court, 1999; DuFour, 2011, Ávila de Lima, 2003). Therefore, teacher isolation is not only self-imposed, but also supported by external, environmental factors. In cases where a school structure does not facilitate collaboration, collaboration depends on teacher volunteerism and initiative to overcome those structural deterrents, like rigid timetabling that disallows team teaching or sporadic team meetings that provide little in-school time to design cross-curricular studies (DuFour, 2011, p. 60). Deemed “egg-crate structures” by Court (1999), those school setups understandably yield interdisciplinary collaboration that is “short-lived, hit and miss, or nonexistent” (p. 25).

By embedding flexible timetables, regular team meetings, and supplementary assessment procedures to top-down evaluation (Court, 1999, p. 25), school structures break down the tradition of teacher isolation and create “collaborative cultures” (DuFour, 2011, p. 61). Due to the prevalence and timelessness of teacher isolation practices, both DuFour (2011) and Ávila de Lima (2003) argue not only the necessity of such structural supports, but urge mandatory teacher participation in them. In opposition to the opinion that such would only breed “contrived congeniality” (DuFour, 2011, p. 58), both DuFour (2011) and Ávila de Lima (2003) cast themselves as believers in “structural collaboration,” which is the result of “intentionally designed and mandatory formal systems of teacher collaboration [that] give rise to positive relations among colleagues” (Ávila de Lima, 2003, p. 215).

Aside from the comfortable custom that teacher isolation has become in many schools, teacher resistance to collaborative school structures also emerges due to the belief that autonomy leads to self-preservation in the workplace. First, professional autonomy prevents burnout, as it reduces the possibility of becoming involved in activities – like literacy coaching or interdisciplinary collaboration – that outside of their foundational commitment to traditional lesson planning for their own classes. When collaborative structures are endorsed and implemented by administration, interdisciplinary collaboration is often misinterpreted as “an administrative plot to compel teachers to do the bidding of others” (DuFour, 2011, p. 58). Secondly, teachers’ value autonomy due to the perception that a successful administrative assessment of their classroom depends on an original lesson plan. Due to the individualized evaluation process for teachers, teachers equate “creativity” with “uniqueness” and being “different” - which are all lesson plan qualities they believe they can only ensure if they work away from everyone else’s influence (Ávila de Lima, 2003, p. 215). Overall, in order for schools to increase the quality of teacher input into collaboration efforts which is often “weak, inconsistent, and inconsequential” due to these misconceptions (Ávila de Lima, 2003, p. 204), the administration must inform teachers about the usefulness, purpose, and benefit of collaborative structures instead of silently instating them with no explanation.

**Cooperation v. Collaboration: The Misuse of Allotted Interdisciplinary Planning Time**

Even when structures are put into place by administrators to foster a “collaborative culture” (DuFour, 2011, p. 61), teachers often struggle to pinpoint what they should collaborate on in the allotted time, bypassing curriculum content – and thus student achievement – for lighter behavioral and organizational issues. For example, unbeneficial – but common - discussion topics for team meetings include brainstorming better punitive tactics for students who wear hats and “determining who will pick up the field trip forms” (DuFour, 2011, p. 60). Rather than targeted or goal-oriented, Ávila de Lima (2003) describes the group work that results from freeform team meetings as “drifting” (p. 204). With the absence of a concrete starting point or guidelines collectively established and agreed upon by school faculty that will direct each team of teachers toward the same “right work,” team meetings may not only address trivial issues, but “deteriorate into complaint sessions,” like so many faculty rooms (DuFour, 2011, p. 60).

Recognizing the inevitable influence of social relationships – including tensions, pressures, and favoritism - among faculty on a school’s collaborative capacity, DuFour (2011), Ávila de Lima (2003), and Nowacek (2009) mention the possibility of an interdisciplinary planning period that strives more toward cooperation, than collaboration. Due to the “micropolitical dimension” of educator relationships that lowers the probability of immediate equality and uniform friendliness among faculty members (Ávila de Lima, 2003, p. 207), many times the unofficial motive of “getting along” overshadows the official motive of “getting results” (DuFour, 2011, p. 61; Nowacek, 2009, p. 512). As cited in Ávila de Lima (2003, p. 214), Sinskin’s (1994) model of bundled departments describes a similar phenomenon where teachers merely maintain amiability and exchange only materials and information, instead of sharing successful classroom practices or curriculum choices. While this “understandable desire for harmony” is necessary for effective collaboration (Nowacek, 2009, p. 512), the ideal would be that, though teacher maturity and professionalism, it is achieved relatively early in the interdisciplinary process and maintained throughout in a noninvasive way.

**The Superficiality, but Dominance, of “Parallel Connections”: Multidisciplinary v. Interdisciplinary**

Aside from the obviously incorrect ways to pursue collaboration as aforementioned - like a behavioral focus or group work that never moves beyond cooperation - teachers also often make a more subtle mistake and take a more “multidisciplinary “ approach to interdisciplinary collaboration. As defined and differentiated by Nowacek (2009), “multidisciplinary” instruction simply juxtaposes the disciplines and recognizes the existence of a topic’s multiple vantage points, while “interdisciplinary” studies “integrates [the] insights” of several disciplines (p. 497-298). In other words, the disciplines in “multidisciplinary” approaches simply match in terms of topic while “interdisciplinary” units negotiate both the overlaps between the disciplines and the constraints of each discipline to propel the “disciplines into dialogue” (Nowacek, 2009, p. 499).

Drawing from her personal “multidisciplinary” misstep during a history-English collaboration, Noskin (1997) identifies why it’s inferior to an “interdisciplinary” approach and how to convert a “multidisciplinary” unit to an “interdisciplinary” one. After teaching Greek myths alongside history’s ancient Greece unit, Noskin (1997) questioned the purpose of the alignment, since there was no theme (i.e. relevancy to modern democracy) to integrate the disciplines on a “meaningful” level and link the ancient civilization and literature to students’ lives (p. 60). By only scheduling the Greek myth reading at the same time as the history unit, Noskin (1997) made a “parallel connection” (p. 60). To one way to overcome “parallel connections,” Noskin (1997) stresses that disciplines share themes, not topics (p. 60). But the prevalence of “parallel connections” – and thus “multidisciplinary” approaches that operate under the illusion of an “interdisciplinary” one – may also reside in how cross-curricular collaboration often revolves exclusively around materials, instead of strategies, extension activities, and classroom literacy practices. According to Ávila de Lima (2003), teachers “select texts but they seldom discuss actual approaches to these texts or to the student exercises” (p. 204). And since “borrowed materials are never thoroughly pure or devoid of resonances from other [disciplines]” (Nowacek, 2009, p. 495), acknowledgment of their interdisciplinary relevancy through cross-curricular connections is the more “meaningful” link unique to interdisciplinary studies (Noskin, 1997, p. 60).

**Conclusion**

For interdisciplinary instruction, the preparatory process is just as much about building bridges between disciplines as it is about strengthening the infrastructure of each individual discipline and deconstructing school structures that limit collaborative capacity. It’s just as much about finding linkages as it is about staying true to differences. Therefore, although “it’s never positive when you get locked inside yourself” (Ávila de Lima, 2003, p. 207), it’s also not positive to lose yourself. To make the process complex, effective interdisciplinary collaboration requires informed negotiation of school structures, disciplinary literacy, theme, and the areas of overlap between activity systems. However, since “the most comprehensive study of factors affecting schooling ever conducted concluded that the most powerful strategy for helping students learn at higher levels was ensuring that teachers work collaboratively in teams to establish the essential learning all students must acquire…”(DeFour, 2011, p. 60), generating support for greater interdisciplinary collaboration – which would take the form of teacher motivation and administration-created opportunities – should not be impossible, even in the face of collaboration’s complexity. Although, it’s important to note that increasing the frequency of interdisciplinary collaboration in schools should not be the first goal if accepted misconceptions about its implementation are producing lower-quality studies. Quality should be corrected before quantity.

References

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