

Social Studies, Interdisciplinary Teaching, and Technology

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ONE OF THE UNINTENDED, and unfortunate, consequences of the No Child Left Behind law—with its emphasis on curriculum standards, and increased reliance on standardized testing—is the loss of integrated curriculum projects and instruction. While some state curriculum standards mention cross-curriculum or multidisciplinary instruction, the end result (for students and teachers) of high stakes testing for specific subject areas is a marked reduction of curriculum materials, classroom projects, and teacher education that focus on bridging the gap between traditional K-12 subject areas. Research suggests that students learn more, enjoy classroom activities, and do as well or better on tests when they are shown how different subjects (such as science and social studies) are related.

Several years ago, I took a group of visiting Japanese educators to Edgewood Junior High in nearby Ellettsville, Indiana, to show them the interdisciplinary curriculum and instruction practiced there. The entire seventh grade was focusing on the Arctic and northern lands in all major subject areas. In science, students were studying the flora and fauna of the Arctic; social studies students were examining the breakup of the Soviet Union and the new nations created out of it; English classes were reading Jack London stories and other books about northern lands; and the mathematics classes were trying to calculate how much mass an iceberg being towed to Saudi Arabia for fresh water would lose based on calculations about temperature and distance. The students worked in interdisciplinary teams. The Japanese visitors were amazed at how enthusiastically the students worked and at how the teacher served more as a resource guide than as a person simply dispensing information.

As I was trying to determine a topic for this technology issue, I was reminded of another project in this same school system that I read about recently. A fifth-grade reading class is working with the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR) on tracking bobcats, an endangered species found in Indiana and several Midwestern states. The class, sponsored by the local newspaper, *The Bloomington Herald-Times*, has adopted one bobcat, which they named Linx. Linx has a radio collar that transmits his location

to the class. They plot his movements daily and send reports to the DNR on a scheduled basis. This reading class is learning biology, geography, and about public policy regarding endangered species; they are also reading about the animal and about efforts to save the species. In a recent newspaper edition, another report on Linx pictured a student showing how they track the bobcat through southern Indiana. Students (and adults) send e-mail questions to the class about the project and students from the class respond. Students in another middle-level school, as well two elementary schools, and a high school are now also tracking their own bobcats.

There are more interdisciplinary activities and projects for elementary and middle level grades than for upper level students. The middle level teachers and administrators have focused more on curriculum integration. However, there are programs, activities, and lesson plans for all grades. Take a look at some of the following sites. I think you and your students will find them interesting, fun, and useful.

Indiana Department of Natural Resources

www.in.gov/dnr/fishwild/endangered/bobcat/bobcat.html
While the “Track a Bobcat” project is for Indiana teachers and students only, educators elsewhere may also find the site informative. Moreover, many states have similar educational programs for endangered species. I “Googled” New Mexico, New Jersey, and North Carolina using the key terms “endangered species” and “education.” There’s a Mexican Gray Wolf project in New Mexico, an “Adopt a Tiger Salamander” program in New Jersey, and North Carolina has a “Save the Loggerhead Turtle.”

North American Association for Environmental Education

www.eelink.net
EE-Link is a resource for students, teachers, and professionals that support K-12 environmental education. You can find links to just about every state department of natural resources, many of which have educational projects and classroom activities.

There are links to technology-enhanced projects on water

management and other environmental issues. Many involve public policy issues that encourage students to learn about political decision-making.

National Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Commemoration

www.lewisandclark200.org

This site features materials, projects, and resources for both students and teachers. Technology plays a key role in the activities and projects. Students engage in live videoconferences and live webcasts from the expedition as it moves west and returns to St. Louis. According to the project's description, students investigate real-life issues in diverse disciplines, including the arts, science, mathematics, history, social studies, geography, and English. "Project resources, content and learning activities will center on essential questions tied to national standards in the appropriate curriculum area." The commemoration continues through September 2006, so there's ample time to "join" the expedition as it nears the Pacific Coast and begins the return home.

American Field Guide from PBS

www.pbs.org/americanfieldguide/teachers

This site features interdisciplinary lesson plans, videos, and other classroom activities for middle and high school students. All the lessons were written by teachers and most are keyed to national standards in one or more subject areas. Units and lesson plans include such topics as "The Economic Use of Natural Areas," "Ancient Architecture of Chaco Canyon," and "Healthy Rivers," a four-part program that examines environmental science and public policy issues. Each program includes a full PBS video program that students can watch.

Lesson Plans and Resources for Social Studies Teachers

www.csun.edu/~hcedu013

I've recommended Marty Levine's website in a previous column, and I am recommending it here again. An emeritus professor at California State University, Northridge, Levine has gathered an excellent set of lesson plan websites, many of which incorporate both technology and interdisciplinary approaches. One recommended lesson plan on African culture for elementary students allows them to play tunes on a "thumb piano" and actually record

them for other students, teachers, or parents. The online activities page includes several interactive activities. On the American Dream project, students design an interdisciplinary learning product such as a website or multimedia stack using the American Memory documents in the Library of Congress.

EconEdLink

www.econedlink.org/lessons

Many of the recommended lessons for K-12 students are interdisciplinary and utilize interactive internet technology. Several activities involve mathematics-related topics, reading the financial pages of newspapers and websites, and considering public policy issues regarding government and the economy. The National Council for Economic Education sponsors this site.

Teaching through Technology

www.ecb.org/ttt

This site, hosted by the Wisconsin Educational Communications Board, is outstanding. It has a large number of technology-based lessons and projects designed by teachers. Each lesson is categorized by subject area and many are interdisciplinary, including social studies, math, science, and reading. The lessons are divided into elementary, middle, and high school levels. This is one of the better sites for finding useful activities and projects that cross subject matter lines.

Web English Teacher

www.webenglishteacher.com

This is another great site for interdisciplinary activities. You can search for activities that integrate English/language arts and social studies, or mathematics. All of them involve interaction with websites and the use of other technologies. In one activity, designed for seventh and eighth grades, students use photographs to improve their English (a second language for many) and to learn about community services.

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