

The Limits of Thematic Instruction

Interdisciplinary instruction, carefully thought out and judiciously applied, can help students make important connections. Contrary to some current thinking, however, not everything needs to be connected. It's not only acceptable, but sometimes preferable, to stay within the traditional disciplinary boundaries.

It's fine, for example, for a fifth-grade class to devote a specific block of time daily to reading, discussing and writing about "Tom Sawyer". The book runs the risk of being swallowed if placed in a 12-week interdisciplinary extravaganza during which students compute the area of board fence that Tom hoodwinked his friends into whitewashing; create geographic relief maps of Hannibal, Missouri; study the formation of stalagmites and stalactites (remember Tom and Becky in the cave?); or dress up in overalls and straw hats for "Tom Sawyer Days".

According to Professor Susan Drake (in "Planning Integrated Curriculum", ASCD, 1993), "It only makes sense to teach through connections". Well, yes, unless the connections don't make sense. There's a tendency in some thematic instruction to push connections beyond the logical and natural into the realm of the strained and artificial. At this point, one is connecting not for the sake of academic reinforcement but merely for the sake of connecting. Connections that are not so much intellectually compelling as cute or clever can transform the classroom from a place of learning into a theme park.

A good theme, thoughtfully selected and judiciously applied, might help clarify and organize: it might provide a central idea or question that, like a lens, helps focus and define a unit of study, revealing what may not have been immediately apparent. Some popular themes, however - for example, "bears", "apples", "discovery", "systems", "change" - are less like lenses than shopping bags; you can stuff just about anything into them. As professor Kathleen Roth observes, the problem with such themes is that they tend to be "selected more for...the availability of materials, the interests of the teacher, and whether they would lend themselves to fun activities for the children, rather than how important and useful the ideas are within the discipline, [and] how powerful the ideas might be for the student..."

Another potential problem with thematic instruction is the way in which a good idea gets turned into an "idée fixe". Instead of thematic instruction being offered as an occasionally-useful tool, it has been transformed into a Philosophy, a Way of Life, an Unshakable Truth.

In a pendulum swing typical of the all-or-nothing absolutism of educational "innovations", the rush to embrace the interdisciplinary has

led some to condemn the traditional subject-matter disciplines. These fervent connectors scorn those who still prefer the linear outline to the web, or who still devote 45 minutes to math, an hour to Language Arts, and 45 minutes to History. And then, as though it were conclusive proof, these ardent advocates of the interdisciplinary offer some variation on the cliché that "in the real world knowledge isn't divided into separate disciplines. When I wake up, I don't do math for 30 minutes and English for an hour. Everything is inter-connected."

The idea that "everything is inter-connected" is a powerful but partial truth, applicable more to metaphysics or ecology than pedagogy. In the classroom, well-intentioned but over-zealous attempts to inter-connect everything may impede rather than advance learning. The traditional subject-matter disciplines offer concepts and categories that help us make sense of the world: boundaries can be as useful as bridges.

This is not to say that the historian should pay no attention to textual nuance, or that the scientist should be ignorant of the past. Clearly, the boundaries between disciplines are not absolute. Nevertheless, the disciplines, as traditionally defined, offer specific emphases that we need to retain, not reject, in the rush to interdisciplinary instruction.

Suggested Guidelines for Thematic Instruction

- Interdisciplinary thematic instruction should be seen as one among many pedagogical tools, not the only or right way to organize instruction. It should complement, not displace, disciplinary studies.
- If you do choose to use a theme, put your theme to the Analogy Test: Is it more like a shopping bag (you can stuff just about anything into it), or more like a lens (it helps define, focus and clarify)?
- When connecting topics across the disciplines, focus on making connections that are logical, natural and appropriate. Be wary of the cute and clever.
- Not everything needs to be connected. Boundaries can be as useful as bridges.
- Make sure that math and science get sufficient attention as math and science, not as add-ons to units on language arts or the social studies.

(Excerpted with permission from the fall 1994 newsletter of the Core Knowledge Foundation, 2012-B Morton Drive, Charlottesville, Virginia, USA 22903. 804-97707550 (tel) 804-977-0021 (fax). The Foundation has developed The Core Knowledge Sequence which offers detailed, explicit, grade-by-grade recommendations for specific content in history, geography, mathematics, science, language arts, and fine arts.)