

Bronxville High: An "Essential" School in Process

Sherry P. King

When the 9th graders in our interdisciplinary elective no longer saw their teachers as teachers of discrete subjects, we knew we were on the way to success. On a given assignment they might seek help from the English teacher as readily as from the social studies teacher—or from the art teacher, for that matter.

Key principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools, of which we are a partner school, are driving forces in our evolving program: personalization, the student-as-worker, exhibition, and the concept of "less is more." Three teachers—Joanne Duffy in social studies, Mary Schenck in English, and Linda Passman in art—are assigned to one course; art is as much a part of the content as English and social studies. We attempt to integrate the disciplines, attending to the basic skills and knowledge each requires as well as to connections among the three.

We piloted the interdisciplinary program in 1986-87 with one heterogeneous class that we scheduled for double periods several times during our eight-day cycle. The content was the same as the regular curriculum—The Ancient World through 1715—but the third teacher and the possibility for different blocks of time allowed us to alter our focus. Perhaps the best way to capture the essence of our program is to describe one of the units.

We began with study of the ancient world. Students were reading *The Odyssey*, a 9th grade required text, and studying Greek culture, with a focus on the norms of society, including notions of hospitality and the value of arts and entertainment. At the same time, students were learning about folios, scrolls, and illustrated manuscripts. Moving deeper into the unit, the teachers struggled to find a creative way for students to exhibit their understanding of the period.

The teachers decided to have students create an additional chapter of *The Odyssey*—not a unique assignment, but other dimensions of the project enhanced it. They had a storyteller come to class as Odysseus and tell his adventures. While the students were working on their own stories, the storyteller, knowledgeable about both the assignment and *The Odyssey*, responded to their drafts by challenging students to try their characters in new situations. He offered provocative responses from his point of view as Odysseus. The final assignment, or exhibition, was to prepare a folio, a scroll, or an illustrated manuscript with their stories. We invited the visiting bard back to join us for a classic banquet, with oral presentations of the stories as its entertainment.

Our approach has produced problems along with successes. Our most prominent hurdle is time—time to plan, time to cover the content, time to be with students. We also struggle with the knowledge that not all students are in this program. Thus we are torn between our desire to encourage divergent thinking, our need for the time required to help students make connections, and our commitment to cover *The Ancient World through 1715*. We struggle, too, with grading policies: how can we promote collaborative learning and still evaluate individuals fairly; how can we ask students to take risks and then have to evaluate them?

Despite these possibly unanswerable problems, we would find it hard to teach any other way. We have seen students learn to read, think, and generalize in ways that go far beyond their peers of similar abilities. We have seen students willing, even eager, to investigate subjects independently and in depth. Our students have maintained high individual standards but have developed a sense of caring for each other as they help one another learn.

We have grown along with our students, becoming facilitators of learning more than disseminators of information. Our daily conversation and collaboration have broken the isolation of teaching. We are piloting a similar class in 10th grade, and expanding our 9th grade program. In our enthusiasm to increase connections among disciplines, we must remember not simply to add content, but to heed our own belief that "less is more."

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sential in the way of education. The toughest part is "the politics of subtraction." That is, if you're going to teach the United States Constitution adequately, you're not going to be able to give much attention to the first administration of Grover Cleveland. You have to decide what is fundamental. Facing such choices is consistent with the current mood.

Where, in your opinion, does vocational education fit in the secondary curriculum?

In one respect I don't think it fits at all. In the current economy, jobs change so fast that any type of job-specific training is a very short-range proposition. So to say that schools should prepare students for specific entry-level jobs may be a nice objective but, if you can't do everything in high school, a low priority.

Put another way, in a rapidly changing job market the most important vocational training is general education, which is exactly what the Committee on Economic Development and other business groups have been saying over and over for five or six years. So, in many of our schools that serve kids who mostly don't aspire to higher education, wise principals are now saying to students, "Look. This program we're putting together may not seem to speak to your immediate job prospects; but in fact it is the most important vocational education you can get, because it's teaching you how to teach yourself in a constantly changing situation."

I must also say that some of the vocational education courses I've seen are superbly taught, because they force the kids to do the work. In shop after shop, I've seen teachers who are in the habit of pushing the problem out to the kids, engaging them. Happily, some of those teachers are prepared to use their talents teaching general education. One whom I admired most—a teacher of electricity—I wrote about in my book. He was just magnificent, and under no illusion that he was teaching for entry-level jobs: he was teaching basic educational skills. It's that kind of imaginative

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