

# How Our Team Dissolved the Boundaries

*Teachers in Ontario who worked together on an integrated curriculum project found that their "separate" subject areas came together naturally when they worked on a theme approach to teaching.*

SUSAN M. DRAKE

We were three men and three women, strangers to each other, selected from across the province to develop interdisciplinary curriculums funded by the Ontario Curriculum Superintendents' Cooperative. Each of us had expertise in a different subject area. We all had active contracts with different school boards. Our mandate was to extend the curriculum ideas in *Holistic Learning: A Teacher's Guide to Integrated Studies*<sup>1</sup> at the middle school level by creating a curriculum that would focus on themes.

We spent nine days together over the course of a year developing integrated curriculums. When I reviewed the journal I kept as team leader, I found that the process we had undergone was clear.

## Letting Go of Old Models

Each of us had different backgrounds in curriculum design. Some had strong leanings toward curriculums that were broken down into small, manageable parts and had a procedural base. Others were more comfortable with a more global picture that would give users an overview of the concepts involved so they could adapt them for classroom use. None had served on a committee where everyone came from such widely different backgrounds.

Our commonality was not our subject

areas but rather an expressed interest in integrated curriculum. In truth, we were all in uncharted territory. As might be expected, we were divided on the question of which format to use. We spent long hours discussing hows and whys and what each of us could live with.

The only thing that seemed clear was that what we had once understood as curriculum design would not work for this project—we had to let go of old models. We came to this realization again and again. Letting go of the familiar can be a painful process, and when each of us came to a place where we couldn't find meaning, we would

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revert back to the way we knew best. For example, those who preferred the curriculum broken down into small, identifiable parts kept coming back to that way of structuring it. At times these regressions would seem like stumbling blocks; in hindsight we saw they were a necessary part of the process.

Each of us had to find personal meaning at every stage of the curriculum design—that was the most important thing. This could take vast amounts of time as we went over and over the same issues. As often as not, we would end up at the starting point, but not before we had wrestled enough with the concepts that they were personally meaningful.

If we had to characterize the curriculum process in one phrase, the best way to describe it would be "dissolving the boundaries." Each of us brought boundaries to this project; we saw in retrospect how artificial they were—they existed because of the ways in which we had each been taught to view the world. When we began to trust our own experience, we found that the boundaries dissolved in many different areas.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 show diagrams of multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary approaches—visual representations of the stages we went through in the process of developing our curriculum. We were not aware of these different stages when we started, so we felt considerable relief when we identified them about midway through the process.

## The Multidisciplinary Experience

As we began building our curriculum, we tried to identify the subject areas involved in each teaching activity offered so that any teacher could pick up the document and see where he or

she fit in. We ourselves represented English, history, geography, science, graphic arts, intermediate special education, physical and health education, and environmental studies. As we worked on a theme, we found we could easily see the place for "our" subject area, and that it was easy to develop teaching strategies.

We were able to include content from other disciplines also, but we found ourselves squeezing in such areas as mathematics that we weren't familiar with. When we involved a math teacher in the process, however, the natural place of math became obvious; we had been limited by our own narrow perspectives. So, while we began the project looking at curriculum building through the lens of our own areas of expertise, we eventually became able to see how some content from other areas could fit into the framework. Later, we realized this was our *multidisciplinary* approach.

### The Interdisciplinary Experience

As we became more comfortable and actually got down to sharing strategies for a theme, we found there were fewer distinctions across subject areas than we had thought; indeed, content overlapped. These connections existed because of the theme being explored, not because the subject areas were formally related. This discovery led us to let go of the notion that we should teach certain facts in certain grades. We carefully labeled each activity, breaking it down into the subject areas that were involved. This seemed very important at the time; we wanted to make the document user-friendly and accessible to all. That we often had to struggle to break down an activity into different areas did not seem as important as the fact that we could do it. We later saw this as our *interdisciplinary* stage.

### The Transdisciplinary Experience

After working with curriculum for several days, we began to see the futility of

FIGURE 1

## A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

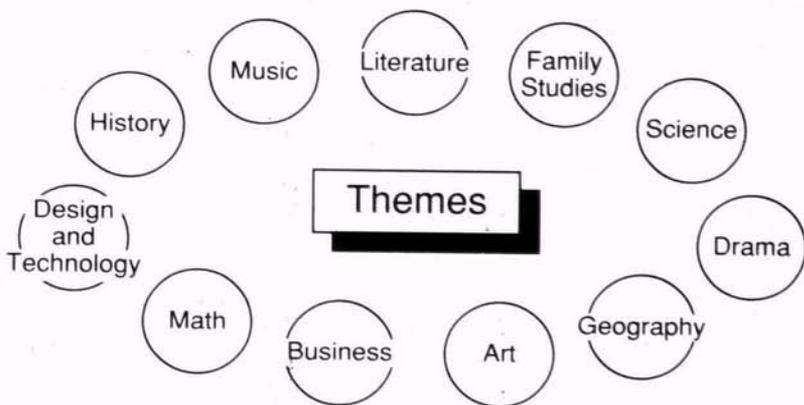
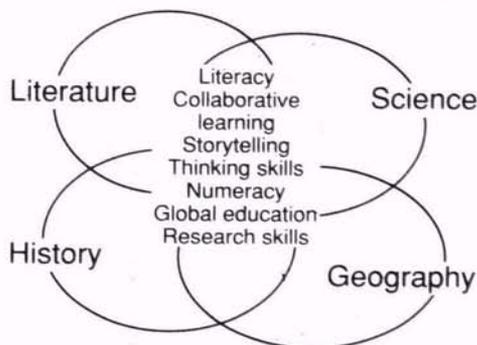


FIGURE 2

## AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH



breaking things down into their smallest parts. The content and the theme were one and the same; there were no real divisions into subject areas unless we made them. This stage we labeled *transdisciplinary*. We abandoned the labeling of subject areas; that is, we erased the divisions we had created up until this point and let the activities stand by themselves. However, we did not do this until we had worked for several days on the project.

We believe that our experience is a natural progression that most people will have to go through when working on collaborative, interdisciplinary curriculum design. The more experience we had working with others of different expertise, the wider our focus became. As our lenses widened, we could see more and more of the natural connections across the curriculum. Eventually, we may become "connection experts" rather than subject experts. Each stage requires a shift in perspective, and each stage is valuable. The important objective of each stage, however, is making connections.

### Dropping Our Assumptions

In letting go of old models, we also had to let go of certain assumptions we had all accepted as truths. Our first concern was how to fit what we were doing with the demands of Ministry documents and school board objectives concerning skills to be acquired by certain grade levels. For example, how could we insure that the War of 1812 was properly covered in grade 8? We considered trying to take a theme and manipulate it to cover required course content, but it didn't take long to realize the impossibility of that task. We were producing this curriculum for large school boards in Ontario; there was no way we could cover mandates from individual boards and Ministry documents from across all the subject areas.

However, the real reason we could

not fit content to previously determined demands was the content—we could not manipulate it to fit a linear framework of knowledge acquisition. We found that the process of generating content surrounding a theme is generic in nature. You cannot change the knowledge component of a theme simply because you are teaching it at a different grade level. We had to let go of the idea

FIGURE 3

### A TRANSDISCIPLINARY APPROACH



of knowledge being sequential and linear. It is not the content that will change but rather the sophistication with which one tackles the theme.

Another question that emerged was whether there was a difference between strategy and content. We found that we were often using the arts as strategies to teach facts. When did art, drama, or poetry in themselves become the focus of teaching? Again, the answer seems to be dictated by the content of the theme itself coupled with the expertise of the teacher. We found, for example, that a teacher trained in art could find

ample places within any theme where specifics about art techniques had a natural place. Again, it was our limitations that put boundaries on possibilities.

### A New Approach

We have decided that when subject areas are not given full acknowledgment in interdisciplinary planning, it is usually due to gaps in the curriculum team's knowledge base and experience, not the lack of a proper place for the subject. For example, we recognized that music was being sadly ignored, so we brought in a music expert. When he presented us with a variety of creative ideas, we could all see the connections, but when we went back to our task, we were hard-pressed to add a rich musical dimension. This experience leads us to recommend that as many different subject areas as possible be involved in curriculum building. It may seem time consuming, but it really helps everyone to begin to see and think in terms of interconnections.

At the end of our nine days together, we looked back at what we had accomplished and were amazed at the distance we had traveled. Recently, I have talked with members of other curriculum teams involved in similar integrated studies projects. When I tell them this story, they nod their heads in agreement. They, too, are experiencing the dissolving of their individual boundaries. As we talk together and share our experiences, I believe we are beginning to accomplish our goals: We're building a base for a new approach to curriculum design. □

J. Miller, B. Cassie, and S. Drake, (1990), *Holistic Learning: A Teacher's Guide to Integrated Studies*. (Toronto: OISE Press).

**Susan M. Drake** is an Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada L2R 3A1.

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