

A Caveat: Curriculum Integration Isn't Always a Good Idea

Just because an activity crosses subject-matter lines does not make it worthwhile; it must also help accomplish important educational goals.

JERE BROPHY AND JANET ALLEMAN

Curriculum integration is sometimes necessary to teach about topics that cut across or transcend school subjects. Even when integration is not necessary, it is often desirable, as when content drawn from one subject is used to enrich the teaching of another (period artwork used in history) or when skills learned in one subject are used to process or apply information learned in another (debates or report writing in social studies).

However, curriculum integration is not an end in itself but a means for accomplishing basic educational goals. Furthermore, recommended activities may not help achieve those goals, nor are they always implemented effectively.

We offer this caveat because, in the course of examining recent elementary social studies series, we saw many suggestions made in the name of integration that we consider counterproductive. Too often, activities described as ways to integrate social studies with other subjects either lack educational value in any subject or promote progress toward significant goals in another subject but not in social studies.

Many of these activities are pointless busywork (alphabetizing the state capitals). Others may have value as language arts activities but don't belong in social studies curriculum (exercises that use social studies content but focus on pluralizing nouns).

Moreover, many suggested activities require time-consuming artistic or

construction work. Some of these develop—or at least allow for—opportunities to use social studies knowledge (constructing maps of the school), but others simply lack educational value (carving pumpkins to look like U.S. presidents). The same is true of various role-play, simulation, collage, and scrapbook activities.

So-called integration activities sometimes even distort social studies content. For example, a unit on pioneer life includes a sequencing-skills exercise built around five steps in building log cabins. Three of these five steps are arbitrarily imposed rather than logically necessary. The authors apparently included this exercise not because it developed key knowledge about pioneer life, but because they wanted to put an exercise in sequential ordering somewhere in the curriculum.

Ill-conceived integration ideas also sometimes require students to do things that are strange, difficult, or even impossible. One activity calls for students to use pantomime to communicate one of the six reasons for the Constitution as stated in its preamble. We do not think that social studies time should be spent practicing pantomime skills, but even if we did, we would select a more appropriate subject for pantomime than reasons for the Constitution.

Finally, suggested activities sometimes call for students to do things they are not prepared to do, either because the task is ambiguous (drawing a hun-

gry face) or because it requires them to use knowledge that has not been taught in the curriculum and is not likely to have been acquired elsewhere (having 1st graders role-play scenes from Mexico when all they have learned about Mexico is its location on a map).

In view of these problems, educators should consider integration a potential tool that is feasible and desirable in some situations but not in all. An activity is appropriate because it promotes progress toward significant educational goals, not merely because it cuts across subject-matter lines. Furthermore, in assessing the time spent in integrated activities versus subject-area ones, educators should weigh the cost-effectiveness of the activities in accomplishing each subject's major goals.

Before we have students engage in activities designed to promote curriculum integration, let's apply criteria:

1. Activities should be educationally significant, ones desirable even if they did not include the integration feature.
2. Activities should foster, rather than disrupt or nullify, accomplishment of major goals in each subject area. □

Authors' note: This work is sponsored in part by the Institute for Research on Teaching, College of Education, Michigan State University. The institute is funded from a variety of federal, state, and private sources, including the U.S. Department of Education and Michigan State University. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the position, policy, or endorsement of the funding agencies.

Jere Brophy is Co-Director of the Institute for Research on Teaching and Distinguished Professor, Department of Teacher Education, Michigan State University, College of Education, Erickson Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824-1034. **Janet Alleman** is Professor, Department of Teacher Education, Michigan State University, same address.

Copyright © 1991 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.