

The Value of Interdisciplinary Units in the Classroom

Before I started teaching, I thought the aspect of the profession that I would like most would be my independence and autonomy. I am a fiercely independent person, and an introvert (although those who have heard me talk may disagree), and I thought a career where I had my “own” space to work would be amazing. And sometimes, I guess it is. My “office” is huge, and filled with creations from my students. I get to decide what I do with my day and how my students and I will interact. I have the freedom and autonomy to map out a year of biology and chemistry the way I think is best. But, I learned a very important lesson my first (and second) year of teaching: I am often wrong. This was especially true when it came to my independence. Yes, it was nice to orchestrate learning experiences for my students, but my most successful units (highest participation and student engagement, and the units that students remembered the most on their end of the year evaluation) were the units that I developed in collaboration with my colleagues.

These types of units are commonly known as interdisciplinary units: units where teachers from two or more subjects collaborate to develop a unit that is taught across multiple classes, so that students see common themes in two or more classes at once. The lines we set up to divide science from math, English and history are arbitrary and sometimes dangerous. Students come into the classroom with the misconception that reading is “not science,” and only for their humanities courses. Interdisciplinary units break this mold and support students so that they can find connections between everything they are learning in school.

In my school, we are lucky to have weekly meetings with all of the teachers who teach the same grade. That means once a week, I can check in with the math, English and history teachers my students have and see how we can weave our content together. This is not easy. I will not lie and say this happened perfectly multiple times throughout the year. But in my first year at this school, we were able to successfully implement one interdisciplinary project in the ninth grade. My colleagues and I developed a unit on race, with the essential question: Is race real? From my angle, my students and I looked at the biology of race, and the interdisciplinary unit cumulated in a **Socratic Seminar** and a research paper. We chose this unit because race is a pertinent and relevant topic to teachers and students in my school: we have a majority minority student population, and a majority of the teachers are white. This dissonance is something we felt as a staff

we needed to address, and so while we talked about the biology of race in my classroom, my students talked about the social implications of race and the history of race in this country and in the world in their other classes.

I think the most poignant moment for me during this unit was when a student, who fit the profile of “class clown” (usually in a positive way!), very seriously made the connection between skin tone and the geographic location of our ancestors. The student was able to verbalize that the skin tone that you have has no correlation to your character or intelligence, only to the geographic region that your ancestors came from. This statement made me proud to work with my colleagues and proud to have some interdependence. When we worked together collaboratively, we were able to create a richer learning experience for our students that they were able to connect to their life outside of school. By looking at race through three lenses, students were able to see how everything they are learning has multiple perspectives, and they found more fulfillment from their education. As a team of teachers, we all felt that the content in this unit would stick with our students for years to come, because we were able to guide them to make so many connections between their content classes in school.

Of course, we have many things to work on for next year: some of our readings were too difficult, and our math teacher wasn’t able to participate fully because we struggled as a team of teachers to find a natural way to integrate algebra into our unit. But, I am so happy I stepped outside of my “office” to work with the people around me. I still have ownership over my work and my pedagogy, but I now have a new and improved outlook on independence and autonomy: sometimes it’s better for my students and my school when I push myself to collaborate.

*Each week, beginning on September 12, members of the KSTF community will be **writing about one of the characteristic actions of teachers acting as primary agents of educational improvement**. This week, we’re writing about teachers acting as primary agents of educational improvement when they work collaboratively with other teachers to initiate, own, and critically evaluate improvement efforts that benefit their own students and have the potential to ultimately benefit all students.*