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Exploring an interdisciplinary expedition in a global history class



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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigated an interdisciplinary expedition (based on the Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound model) in a Global History Class in an urban charter high school to understand what happens during an expedition and how the students viewed the expedition. Findings indicated students were engaged in learning about issues of security and privacy, but failed to make interdisciplinary connections between global history and their other classes. Additionally, the Global History teacher encountered challenges in enacting interdisciplinary, expeditionary curricula with racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse students. This study highlights the benefits and challenges of implementing an interdisciplinary approach to teaching, as well as the need for additional supports for teachers who want to implement interdisciplinary curricula.

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Introduction

A number of reforms such as restructuring, theme and charter schools, authentic assessment, and interdisciplinary curriculum have been implemented to assist failing urban school districts. Yet few attempts have been made to investigate what is currently happening in these schools and individual classrooms (Crocco & Thornton, 2002). Additionally, with the recent implementation of the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, high schools across the United States are attempting to integrate their approaches to social studies and English Language Arts curriculum and instruction (Berson & Berson, 2013). The NCSS Standards National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) (2010) call for teachers to integrate their curriculum in order to promote civic competence among students, and the Inquiry Arc of the C3 Framework supports students in analyzing “interdisciplinary challenges in our social world” (National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), 2013, p. 6). Thus, research about interdisciplinary approaches to curriculum and instruction are timely and significant.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine an interdisciplinary expedition (based on the Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound model) in a Global History class in an urban Expeditionary Learning (EL) charter high school. I wanted to gain stronger understandings of what happened during an expedition, how students viewed the expedition, and what, if any, challenges the teacher encountered in enacting the expedition. In conducting the study, I found the curricular approach the teachers described before the expedition differed from the approach they enacted. Students were engaged and interested in their learning, yet only realized interdisciplinary connections between their English and Art classes, instead of

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among their English, Art, and Global History classes. I also discovered the Global History teacher experienced challenges motivating students to engage in her class and think critically about the expedition's big ideas. This case study illustrates the benefits and challenges of implementing interdisciplinary expeditions, and the importance of enacting learner-centered and assessment-centered instruction (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005) with heterogeneous students.

Related literature

Interdisciplinary curriculum and instruction in secondary classes

Current interdisciplinary curriculum efforts are connected to broader reform efforts in curriculum and instruction (Sizer, 1996). Advocates of interdisciplinary curriculum claim it has the potential to raise student achievement, increase student engagement, and inspire teachers to create relevant, meaningful lessons (Beane, 1997; Jacobs, 1997; Tchudi & Lafer, 1996). Studies about interdisciplinary teams illustrate students benefit when teachers learn and work together as communities of learners (Erb, 2001; Kain, 2001). Yet, researchers also urge teachers to be cautious about embracing interdisciplinary curricula because disciplinary connections can be superficial and subject disciplines can be shortchanged (Adler & Flihan, 1997).

Wineburg and Grossman (2000) assert that discussing interdisciplinary teaching and learning is difficult because there is no systematic research base. Most studies arguing for or against interdisciplinary methods have been written by practitioners. To extend the research base on interdisciplinary curricula, Applebee, Adler, and Flihan (2007) examined 11 interdisciplinary teams in New York and California. They studied the curricular structure used to integrate the disciplines, pedagogies teachers enacted, and tasks students completed.

Drawing on their earlier research about interdisciplinary approaches (Adler & Flihan, 1997; Applebee, Burroughs, & Cruz, 2000), Applebee et al. (2007) used an interdisciplinary continuum to point out differences among the teams they studied. The continuum begins with *predisciplinary* curricula, which is common in elementary schools, and seeks to enrich students' basic knowledge about a topic through themed or integrated units of study. The second point on the continuum is *disciplinary* curricula, which is the study of traditional school subjects. The next point on the continuum is *correlated* curricula, where teachers relate their subjects, but still teach them independently with little linking (e.g. students read *The Great Gatsby* in English class while the U.S. History class studies the 1920s). The fourth point, *shared* curricula, exists when teachers overlap concepts across their disciplines, although discussions often remain subject specific (e.g. social studies and English classes explore concepts of the American dream). Finally, at the end of the continuum is *reconstructed* curriculum, where disciplinary boundaries are often absent and courses are blended (e.g. Humanities courses).

Applebee et al. (2007) investigated the following three research questions through qualitative and quantitative analyses:

- (a) How useful is the interdisciplinary continuum in understanding differences among interdisciplinary programs?
- (b) Do interdisciplinary classrooms tend to use approaches that emphasize cognitively engaging instruction, including envisionment-building activities and extended discussion of significant ideas?
- (c) What happens to the various school subjects (their conversations and ground rules) when they become part of an interdisciplinary curriculum?

They found that interdisciplinary study "is neither a problem nor a panacea" (Applebee et al., 2007, p. 1036). Disciplinary lenses were integral in addressing interdisciplinary themes and disciplinary activities were present in all the teams that participated in the study. Yet, there were instances where curriculum was distorted and specific subjects were short-changed. The authors pointed out that this was an issue because of how teachers implemented the interdisciplinary curriculum. They concluded that teaching interdisciplinary curriculum is "a matter of trade-offs" and should not be legislated by school administrators (p. 1037). While teachers and students benefit from exploring new ideas and studying multiple perspectives, this type of teaching also requires teachers to have compatible personalities and additional planning time to work together.

While the high school teachers described in this case study did not subscribe to Applebee et al. (2007) interdisciplinary continuum, the teachers' descriptions of the expedition before it began fit closely with *shared* curricula. As the expedition progressed, however, the curricula seemed more aligned with *correlated* curricula because the teachers used common big ideas and guiding questions in their classes, yet focused their instruction on subject-specific content.

Expeditionary learning expeditions

Expeditionary Learning Schools (ELS's) grew out of a collaboration between the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Outward Bound, USA. Based on the philosophies of Outward Bound founder, Kurt Hahn, and Harvard Graduate School of Education's theoretical and practical approach to teaching and learning, the 150 ELS's throughout the United States "provide teachers and students with academically rigorous experiences that are marked by purposeful learning, challenge, collaboration, and perseverance" (Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, 2011, p. 3). The growing number of ELS's, especially small charter schools using this model, suggests expeditionary learning practices are beneficial for teaching and learning.

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