

Making More Sense of America and the World through Interdisciplinary English

Maureen E. Tarpey and Karen Bucholtz

Last year two new interdisciplinary English courses were offered at our high school for the first time: American Studies and World Studies. The courses came about when interested teachers from English, Social Studies, World Languages, and a librarian worked together one summer to simply gather materials which could enhance and connect their disciplines. Suddenly, someone had the idea that bringing these motivated and interested teachers together with piles of materials from around America and the world was the perfect basis for a new course or two. After a presentation to the principal and more work over the summer, the courses became reality. Schools with similar courses were visited, materials and resources were gathered, curricula was written, and brains were thoroughly "stormed." As the two English teachers at the helm of these courses for the third year, we have come together to present our thoughts, challenges, philosophies, strategies, and even some discussion of advantages and disadvantages.

FORMAT AND STRUCTURE OF AMERICAN STUDIES AND WORLD STUDIES

Both American Studies and World Studies are team-taught courses in which both English and Social Studies teachers teach together, in the same room, for two consecutive periods (48 minutes each) every day. American Studies is offered to eleventh graders at the "college prep" level, and World Studies is offered to tenth-grade honors level students. Students in these courses receive one grade worth ten credits (not separate grades for English and social studies). The courses are thematically structured, with literary works strategically placed to complement the study of historical/geographical units.

Both courses focus on incorporating activities which connect and combine the two

disciplines, without sacrificing the demands of either. Such activities include: vocabulary, SAT preparation, writing, and speaking in English and note-taking, map work, study skills, and writing in social studies. Hands-on projects which attempt to reach students at multiple intelligences are incorporated as well as a great deal of cooperative learning projects, student-centered learning, and utilization of computer technology (students have use of a fully-equipped writing and Internet lab). The double-block time period is certainly largely responsible for making this approach feasible and successful.

Without room for detailed discussion of these teaching strategies, we have decided to present a basic outline of each of our courses and include a typical "day in the life of" sketch as well as examples of projects.

AMERICAN STUDIES CURRICULUM

American Studies combines American Literature (traditional English curriculum for eleventh graders) and American History II (traditional history course for eleventh graders). The course is structured around four quarter thematic units: The American Dream (appearance vs. reality), Building New Worlds, War and Peace, and Us vs. Them (discrimination and polarization). These units cover not only English and social studies materials, but also incorporate art, music, and architecture appropriate to each unit or time period.

A DAY IN THE LIFE: DECEMBER 3, 1996

In American Studies this past year, we had more students with special needs who would normally have taken a lower "tracked" course than ours. Thus, we had new and different challenges.

Utilizing group work and interdisciplinary projects and lessons has been extremely successful for us and for our students. Perhaps because of the interaction with each other or the longer time spent together each

Two teachers discuss American Studies, World Studies, and English.

day, the class bonded in a special way. They helped each other out, and we saw them studying together at the academic support center. Students told us that they enjoyed the class, and that they thought they learned more from the combined approach and from combined lessons.

A day from the unit "Building New Worlds" is a typical lesson. At the beginning of the quarter, we studied *My Antonia* by Willa Cather and westward expansion, the Gold Rush, the Indian Wars, and U.S. government policy toward Indians. We then studied the 1920s and read F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

After reading through chapter six in *Gatsby* and discussing prohibition, the Tea Pot Dome Scandal, presidents Harding, Coolidge, and economic and social changes of the 1920s, we gave the students a handout with slang words that originated in the twenties. We discussed what had occurred in the beginning chapters of *Gatsby* and asked the students to use the handout to write a summary of the plot and their impressions of the novel so far incorporating the slang words from the handout.

Katie missed many of the finer details of events in the chapters, but certainly captured the essence of the novel and the 1920s when she wrote:

This book just appears to be *banana oil*. I don't really understand what is happening or going on. All I really understand is this guy Gatsby is a *lug*. Everybody thinks he is so *ritzy*. He is only that in the sense of having money and wealth. But that is a bunch of *malarkey*. Deep down, he is just a *ham-and-egger*. And some even think that he is just a *wowser*. But they need to wise up and see the real him. He is a *sheik* man, but he's sort of a *nitwit*. He throws parties and doesn't even introduce himself to his guests, and they are beginning to think he is a *sad sack*. Another thing I picked up was that the people in these times and especially at these parties were drinking a lot of *giggle water*. And the law was telling them that they were not allowed to drink it, sell it or buy it. So they just made *bathub gin*, and got totally *blotto*, acted totally *gaga* and had a *grand* old time.

We heard our American Studies students walking down the halls, using their new slang words with other friends, and they were so amused that they had this new

knowledge known only to them. The lesson, although fairly simple, accomplished several objectives:

- 1) students summarized the plot and in so doing, exhibited their understanding of the novel (and demonstrated evidence of having read it!);
- 2) students incorporated new words with historical significance to the times, thus learning more about the popular culture of the 1920s;
- 3) many students discussed themes and symbols they saw in *Gatsby* (as Katie did with appearance vs. reality above);
- 4) students incorporated their knowledge of the historical period by relating what was happening in *Gatsby* to events studied in history (prohibition, speak-easies, etc.).

Students also had fun.

Our 1920s and *Gatsby* unit is also one of the units that students are most excited about because it ended with a double-period, 1920s style, Jay Gatsby-inspired ball. The class divided into groups, and certain groups were responsible for and graded upon the accomplishment of their duties. Duties included procuring refreshments appropriate to the 1920s (no giggle water allowed!), providing music appropriate to the time period, teaching the party attendees dances (the Charleston, Fox Trot) and conducting a dance contest at the ball, completing decorations for the ballroom, providing costumes for the attendees, planning other party activities, and generally managing all other groups. It was a celebration of the end of our learning, and it was also a great way to spend the last two periods before Christmas vacation!

WORLD STUDIES CURRICULUM

Welcome to 180 Days Around the World! World Studies travels through many countries through close examination of twentieth-century writers and the cultures they represent in their works. Unlike most world study courses, ours does not emphasize nor follow a world history chronology. Instead, the history of each country visited becomes only one component and is complemented with the study of language, dress, government, geography, religion, the role of women, music, arts, and let us not forget the food.

Literature selected for study includes novels, biographies, poetry, myths and legends by authors with ethnic ties or vested in-

terest to each country. Nonfiction articles and essays further enhance the ongoing themes of migration, religion, relationships, and revolution. Every part of call includes a primary text, a project, and a major writing assignment.

The course brochure lists the students' travel itinerary. Travel etiquette (ethnocentric comments), responsibility (classroom expectations), and proper identification papers (reading and writing standards), are explained before the trip begins. Guides (guest speakers) are provided when available and an occasional side trip (field trip) promotes added interest and research.

Students are required to submit monthly news articles on countries or continents we are currently studying, to find and read thematic texts every school term, and to participate in cooperative learning situations with their peers. Rites of passage and universals are identified and explored in every culture. "Travelers" recognize visual differences throughout the world but delight in discovering more similarities. Indeed, the sun warms all human beings.

FINDING BALANCE AND DIRECTION IN OUR WORLD

Students love interdisciplinary projects. Most current research indicates that projects where students actively take risks, make judgments, establish time lines, and produce results are the assignments that they embrace, remember, and use to model real life work. At the heart of my World Studies course is the project. Following are some samples of the projects that worked so well we chose to use them on our third voyage.

China

After exploring Chinese medicine, student groups were asked to create a brochure that would advocate alternative medical practices to reduce the overall cost of medicine. Pamphlets and brochures were designed for Hillary Clinton's task force on reducing the cost of medicine in the U.S. Brochures on herbal medicine, acupuncture, tai-chi, and massage therapy resulted. Students discovered through their research that medical schools throughout the world are including these options as required courses for future doctors.

China's primary text: *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan (1989, New York: Putnam).

Middle East

After reading a journal by a teenager who tries to speak out against his country through an underground newspaper, students were given a Middle Eastern country of their own and asked to produce an edition of an underground paper. Each group had to establish a voice, purpose, and audience for their publication, produce a variety of articles including graphics, and develop a secret distribution plan. Newspapers called *Kurds and Whey*, *Textiles of the Nile*, *Kurdish Delights*, and *The Daily Bread* were only a few.

Middle East's primary text: *A Hand Full of Stars* by Rafik Schami (1990, New York: Dutton).

India

One of the truly interesting facts regarding the India of old as well as today is the application and practice of the caste system. Through travel videos and the two texts read, students began to understand the caste system theory, especially as tenth graders in a high school that leaves "privileges" to the upper classmen. Similarities and differences, advantages and disadvantages were presented by groups as each focused on one primary caste (the caste system is currently "outlawed" but practiced in today's India).

India's primary texts: *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya (1954, New York: J. Day) and *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse (1957, New York: New Directions).

Russia

The approach to teaching the long, revolutionary past of Russia/Soviet Union is often tedious and boring. Handing over that responsibility to the students makes much more sense. Depending on the size of the class, a number of past leaders were identified and assigned to students. Students researched the lives of their leaders and then delivered a speech to the people of Russia as the leader assigned. Accomplishments, tragedies, historical connections, and such were included as well as an accurate representation of the character in his/her delivery. This first person public speech added a dramatic touch to the routine speech "to inform."

Russia's primary text: *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1963, New York: Dutton).

Projects where students actively take risks, make judgments, establish time lines, and produce results are the assignments that they embrace.

AMERICAN STUDIES—FOUR THEMES

American Studies is structured on four themes: one per quarter. The following is a list of the four thematic units and the sub-units which are included under each:

- I. THE AMERICAN DREAM: MYTH VS. REALITY
 - A. Reconstruction
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
 - B. Immigration and the growth of cities
Immigrant short stories & poetry
 - C. Industrial development and inventions
Ben Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*
 - D. Unionism, political reform, and populism
The Jungle excerpts
 - E. Education
W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington
 - F. Progressives
Maggie: A Girl of the Streets
 - H. McCarthyism
The Crucible
- II. BUILDING NEW WORLDS
 - A. The Frontier
My Antonia
 - B. Native Americans
Native American poetry; Chief Joseph
 - C. The Jazz Age
The Great Gatsby
 - D. The Depression & the New Deal
movie: *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, *The Grapes of Wrath* excerpts
 - E. Suburbia and the 1950s
The Catcher in the Rye
 - F. The Space Race
(*Apollo 13* excerpt)
 - G. New Technologies
non-fiction; research papers
- III. WAR AND PEACE
 - A. Imperialism
War poetry, short stories
 - B. World War I
All Quiet on the Western Front, *Johnny Got His Gun*
 - C. Between World Wars
A Farewell To Arms excerpts
 - D. World War II
Gone to Soldiers excerpts, *Night*
 - E. Korea
I Didn't Say Goodbye
 - F. Vietnam
first hand accounts; short stories by Tim O'Brien
(*The Things They Carried*)
 - G. The Cold War
non-fiction
 - H. The Gulf War
non-fiction, newspapers, and first hand accounts
- IV. US vs. THEM
 - A. Civil Rights Movement
I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings
 - B. Social Programs
Modern poetry
 - C. Immigrant vs. Nativist
Amy Tan short stories
 - D. Suffrage Movement & men vs. women
"A White Heron," "The Yellow Wallpaper," *The Awakening* excerpts, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and modern feminist lit.

Additional projects throughout my yearly course include personal poetry portfolios during a study of poetry south of the border (Pablo Neruda, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Sandra Cisneros are musts), talking time lines during Japan's dynasties, and the character trial of the new tragic hero in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959, New York: McDowell).

HINTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After teaching American Studies and World Studies respectively for three years now, we certainly are not experts at interdisciplinary teaching. We can, however, relate some hints and recommendations for teaching these types of courses.

Team Teaching, Block Format

One of the most important elements to the success of these courses is having the double-block, team-teaching format. We have met teachers from other schools who try to teach interdisciplinary courses to the

same class, two separate periods (one English, one history) in two separate classrooms and in different (not back-to-back) periods of the day. These teachers have told us that this arrangement is much more difficult and probably not as successful. Having both teachers in the room for the two blocks and working with all students at the same time makes the learning experience truly interdisciplinary. We are all lifetime learners and when students see their teachers posing questions and adding commentary, they will hopefully see themselves modeling this same behavior in their adult life. Finding and making new connections to what we teach is at the heart of what we do. After all, American literature was not created in a vacuum, but reflects and sometimes has great influence upon American history.

Common Planning Time

Another key to success is common planning time on a daily basis as well as before

180 Days Around the World

Welcome aboard the *Ansara-Bucholz Cruise Line!* Honors English and Social Studies will promise adventure, enrichment, and maturity as we navigate the waterways of the world. Your itinerary has been carefully planned and requires your daily attention and active participation. Always keep your passport and luggage close at hand as we dock in several famous ports of call. Your captains agree to provide all tourists with a wealth of intriguing locations and numerous activities that entertain as well as inform. Acts of kindness and foreign courtesy will be encouraged, acknowledged, and applauded.

ENJOY THE CRUISE!

All passengers must abide by the rules aboard ship in order to guarantee their safety and maximize their cultural awareness. Seven simple but mandatory rules must be reinforced during our excursion.

1. All necessary documents including papers, reports, and projects must be typed, reflecting a professional appearance.
2. Although appearance is important the quality of work must be scholarly, and meet teacher requirements.
3. A three-ring binder or large folder must be used to save the multiple handouts used throughout your journey.
4. Timely arrival and departure times must be adhered.
5. A travel log (notebook) will be kept aboard ship to record highlights, register those Kodak moments, and house newspaper clippings from around the world.
6. When groups work together everyone must take responsibility. Our safety record shows no overboard accidents or mutinies!
7. Mutual respect for one another is paramount.

VISIT #1—INDIA

Texts—*Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse
Nectar in A Sieve by K. Markandaya

Paper—Metaphorical Language

Project—Oral Presentations
The Caste System

VISIT #2—MIDDLE EAST

Texts—*A Hand Full of Stars* (Syria) by Rafik Schami
"Beliefs and Values, Emotion and Logic in an Arab World"
"From Behind the Veil" (Iraq)
"The Butcher" (Iran)

the course begins. Our administration has been extremely supportive of this endeavor—providing us a block for common planning time each day as well as paying for three days of work in curriculum revision last summer (five full days were provided the summer before our pilot year). This time together is critical to well-planned units and to fostering a positive relationship between the two teachers.

Paper and Project—"The Power of Free Speech"
Underground Journalism

VISIT #3—JAPAN

Texts—*Hiroshima* by John Hersey
Sadako and a Thousand Paper Cranes
Essays and short stories

Paper—A Vision for Education

Project—Debate

VISIT #4—SOUTHEAST ASIA

Educational Seminar on "migration" that addresses homelessness, hunger, and literacy.

Text—*Tapestries* (short stories from the Asian Pacific Rim)

Project—A Gift for Children
Search, Find, and Rescue

VISIT #5—CHINA

Text—*The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan
Essays on China

Paper—"Family"

Project—Chinese Healing Practices
A Health Care Reform Brochure

VISIT #6—LATIN AMERICA

Texts—*The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros
Poetry from south of the border
Short stories by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Writing—Poetry Notebook

Project—Latin American Fashion Statement

VISIT #7—RUSSIA

Texts—*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Alexander Solzenitsyn
"A Marriage Proposal" by Chekov

Paper—"Camp Life in Siberia"

Project—Russia's Leaders
Public Speeches

VISIT #8—AFRICA

Text—*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe
Essays and a play

Paper—"An African Tragedy"

Project—Dramatic Reenactments

Teacher Rapport

Students evaluating these courses have identified the rapport between the two teachers as the most important ingredient to the courses' success. In some ways, they see the team approach more like a marriage.

Fortunately, in both our cases, we "found" our teaching colleagues. In most schools assigning a faculty member the responsibility of teaching an interdisciplinary

course becomes the worst possible way to begin. Instead, we suggest schools invite teachers to explore the possibility.

Teaching styles, philosophies, and expectations must fit or at least be clearly understood and respected. In most situations we have experienced, the more similarities the teachers share the better. However, differences allow for more student flexibility. As an example, in World Studies I am the older, more traditional teacher while my colleague is younger and much more liberal. Students tend to go to the instructor who mirrors their own views.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

From my experience, the benefits of teaching American Studies far outweigh any drawbacks. The literature becomes an integral part of the students' learning in two periods each day, and thus the stress on reading and comprehending the material is constant. Students see reasons why reading *The Great Gatsby* is important, and they understand where it "fits" in American literature and history. I also teach two sections of American literature at the honors level, and because I teach the same curriculum (in more of a chronological order as opposed to thematic), I see the benefits and disadvantages clearly.

Student Resistance

One of the drawbacks that we encountered two years ago, but surprisingly not this past year, was student resistance to some of the projects we presented to them. There was, at first, a large group who rejected our suggestions to try new things for alternative assessment. For example, one lesson we presented involved watching the history "School House Rock" videotape on women's suffrage. We then asked the students to work with a group to write a "School House Rock" type song of their own based on suffrage or on the literature we were studying in conjunction with the unit (Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*).

At first, the students refused to do this. After much debate and discussion, we did convince students to at least write the words and present them to the class. Extra credit points were awarded for groups brave enough to sing their songs. This resistance to new and different types of projects did wane as the year

progressed, however, and by the end of the year, no one was afraid to try something new.

Coverage

Another drawback that we both see is finding enough time to "cover" everything we would like to in as much detail as we would in a regular English class. Because American History II, for example, is a more content-heavy course (Reconstruction to the Gulf War!), and because we incorporate many lessons that intertwine the two disciplines, teachers must at times struggle with finding enough time to do everything they would like to do. The time we spend discussing history and English, however, is approximately equal (not everyday, but overall).

We stress to the students that studying English is not only about reading books and studying vocabulary words and grammar; it is about communication. If they are giving a speech on the Presidential election of 1996 or writing a paper on the parallels between the Red Scare, *The Crucible* and McCarthyism, that is all "English." Delivering presentations with heavy historical references utilizes public speaking techniques and communication. Finding the time to do SAT preparation and grammar lessons is difficult because so much of our units involve cooperative learning and hands-on activities, but it is not impossible. In teaching the traditional English classes, we do find it easier to delve more deeply into the literature and literary movements and styles. The courses, in every other aspect (number and type of papers written, vocabulary studies, SAT prep, etc.), are much the same.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps because our first love is English, we also feel that we wouldn't want to teach all interdisciplinary courses. Yet, interdisciplinary courses have a place as an alternative choice for students, as a unique and valuable learning experience, and as an academic challenge. After all, in the real world, aren't we all a member of a team? Schools should begin to offer and model more real world opportunities. Interdisciplinary teaching and learning can clearly be one of those challenging options.

Maureen E. Tarpey and Karen Bucholz both teach at North Middlesex Regional High School in Townsend, Massachusetts.