Making Integrated Curriculum a Reality

The Canadian province of Ontario is a proving ground for the implementation of integrated curriculum, according to Susan Drake of Brock University and Jack Miller of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. In 1993, Ontario issued a controversial new common curriculum, Miller said, which set forth 10 cross-curricular outcomes and 4 major areas of study: language, self and society, the arts, and math/science/technology. The new curriculum represented “a radical shift” in that it moved from a time-based, subject-based approach to an outcome-based one, Miller said. He and Drake are conducting a three-year study of how this shift is affecting schools in the province.

Among Ontario educators, three basic assumptions are changing, Drake said. The purpose of education is no longer seen as maintaining the status quo but as ensuring success for all students. Content is no longer the only thing considered worth knowing; higher-order thinking skills and interpersonal life skills are now also valued. And the accepted principles of teaching and learning are shifting from the traditional transmission model to an integrated, constructivist approach that is “based on a whole different set of beliefs.”

Nonetheless, use of integrated curriculum is very uneven across the province, Drake said. Some school systems are being proactive, while others are just “sitting and waiting” or adapting integrated units created elsewhere. “There are two very different attitudes out there,” she reported.

Educators who focus on learning outcomes are more likely to integrate subject areas, Drake said. Focusing on content often reinforces a traditional, disciplinary approach to curriculum, she has found; whereas focusing on cross-disciplinary outcomes “has made a tremendous difference” in the way educators structure the curriculum.

Ontario educators are uneasy with the changes, however, because evaluation is still subject-based. Miller quoted one teacher who said, “I’m tearing my hair out, because I can’t divide my marks from the integrated unit into separate subjects.” Evaluating skills-rather than just assigning a letter grade to a subject-is a real challenge,” Miller conceded.

Other barriers to integration include:
- The timetable-Block scheduling “seems to be almost necessary for these changes to happen,” Drake said.
- Workspace-Teachers often lack meeting areas in which to collaborate.
- The blurring of leadership roles-Department heads, for example, are being redefined as cross-curricular, and “a strong union fights this every step of the way,” Drake said.
- Teachers’ attitudes-“The insecure teacher has a very hard time with this,” Miller said. “You can’t be territorial any more.”

What are educators doing to gain public acceptance for curriculum integration? Some school systems are inviting community members to help “carve out” essential learning outcomes, Drake said; those citizens who participate will then “defend why the school needs to be innovative.” In reporting students’ achievement, educators have won parent support by giving lists of skills and indicating exactly what children are learning.

Ontario educators are discovering that integrated curriculum is “really about everything,” Drake said. It affects outcomes, content, teaching strategies, assessment, and reporting. One change demands another, and all parts of the system have to be aligned. The change process may seem “nit-picky” and slow, she said, but it’s producing a fundamental change in education.

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