

*HOW DO STUDENTS LEARN HISTORY? THE PROBLEM WITH TEACHING HISTORY AS PART OF AN INTEGRATED OR INTERDISCIPLINARY CROSS CURRICULAR PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH*

Yosanne Vella, Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Malta

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**Abstract**

*Interdisciplinary/cross-curricular teaching involves a conscious effort to apply knowledge, principles, and/or values to more than one academic discipline simultaneously. The disciplines may be related through a central theme, issue, problem, process, topic, or experience (Jacobs, 1989). This approach is often seen as a panacea to various problems facing education today; from opening up more space and time on overcrowded school timetables to cutting down fragmentation and giving a more holistic, relevant and modern education. Unfortunately while undoubtedly having various positive aspects, like most cures, an interdisciplinary approach does not come without a number of negative side effects. This paper will attempt to show how, at times, effective history teaching does not sit comfortably with interdisciplinary approaches; indeed, in some instances they are incompatible.*

**Key words**

Citizenship education, Citizenship, Cross-curricular, Curriculum planning, History, Humanities, Integration, Inter-disciplinary, Malta, National Curriculum, Pedagogy, Thematic curriculum

**Introduction**

Interdisciplinary/cross-curricular teaching, sometimes also called an integrated approach, involves a deliberate attempt to apply knowledge and principles to more than one academic discipline concurrently. This approach is also linked to project work, topic or thematic teaching which incorporate the integration of different curricular areas around a particular topic, a central theme, issue, problem, process, or experience. This teaching approach is highly favoured in many primary schools (5 to 11 years-olds) in Europe and to a lesser extent in secondary schools too. In the secondary sector (11 to 16 year-olds) it is more difficult to implement as a method because it is harder to remove the subject barriers. However because of the attractiveness of cross-curricular advantages, attempts occur here too. Thus in the case of humanities such 'umbrella' titles as citizenship education, social studies and environmental studies may replace separate academic subjects such as geography, sociology, home economics, physical and social education, religious studies and history. These are now often taught as one integrated course.

This approach is seen as a panacea to various problems facing education today, from opening up more space and time on overcrowded school timetables to cutting down fragmentation and giving a more holistic, relevant and modern education. Unfortunately, while undoubtedly having various positive aspects, like most cures, an interdisciplinary approach which mixes history with civics or with any other subject does not come without a number of serious negative side effects. There are three particular challenges presented by an interdisciplinary/cross-curricular approach to history teaching and learning which I feel need to be addressed. These are decrease in a history teaching and learning time, loss of independence for history as an academic subject and that its pedagogy may not be reconcilable with citizenship education and interdisciplinary approaches.

### **Problems of teaching history within an inter-disciplinary/cross-curricular approach**

#### **Less history teaching and learning time**

First of all interdisciplinary/cross-curricular approaches compound the already existing problem of very little history time on school timetables; as Van der Leeuw-Roord (2001) found, 'the time allocated to history in schools is under pressure everywhere in Europe with a tendency to further decrease' (p.22). The situation of the dwindling history lesson is made worse because, within an interdisciplinary-cross-curricular approach, history stops being the focus and has to merge with all the other subject areas.

#### **Loss of independence for history as a school subject**

This leads to the second difficulty, that history ceases to exist in its own right. This was already a worry in 1992 when the top concern of most western European History Teachers' Associations was a possible loss of the independent position of history in the curriculum (Van der Leeuw-Roord 2006). By 2001 a considerable change in European school history curricula was noted by Stradling (2001) and according to Van der Leeuw-Roord (2001), referring to Stradling's work, 'There is now far more emphasis on recent and contemporary history, and a growing focus on strengthening European consciousness, human rights and civil society through the teaching of history and civics' (p.22).

#### **The nature of history as an academic subject and its pedagogy may not be reconcilable with citizenship education and interdisciplinary approaches**

Citizenship education has become very popular in the last 15 years and many interdisciplinary curricula are now tailored to include history and other humanities within the citizenship umbrella, and this leads me to the third and to me the most worrying aspect of an interdisciplinary/cross-curriculum. A concern that by far transcends both the two previous concerns, that is, the decrease in the time allotted to proper history teaching and that history stops being a separate subject on the school timetable. It is important to point out that in the case of history there is the added problem that history and citizenship do not always sit comfortably together; indeed, in some instances they are incompatible. Whereas citizenship is concerned with developing certain attitudes and values which currently prevail in a society, history is about questioning evidence. Citizenship is essentially an initiation process while history is not designed for this.

History teachers know that there are various problems when it comes to historical explanation. One does not need to be a postmodernist to realize that 'truths' uncovered by history are imperfect. The questions historians ask are determined by the questions of their society, reflecting the same apprehensions or optimism of the time rather than the historical period the historian is studying and all this casts serious doubt on the objectivity of history.

All our historical knowledge comes to us in an indirect way. This is true both for evidence coming from primary historical sources and for evidence coming from secondary historical sources. When working with primary sources we are dealing with what survives; other material which did not survive might have produced an entirely different picture. There will always be the possibility of sources being forged and the information they are giving is entirely false. This can also happen through mistakes occurring while the historian is working with the sources, for example mistakes during translations or while deciphering calligraphy. But even if one were to give allowance to these human errors, there exist even more serious problems when dealing with historical material. A truly untouched authentic piece of evidence cannot be said to exist. What we have all comes to us second hand, even documents, which are often regarded as sacrosanct where facts are concerned, were written by fallible human beings; even if they were actual eyewitnesses of the events they are reporting, their memory can be faulty. The account

is influenced by the eyewitness's prejudices and biases, which may cause him or her, even if perhaps unconsciously, to exaggerate or modify certain things.

Furthermore even when correct facts can be established, they only start to have meaning once the historian has gone to work on them. Facts are only the raw material, history is a continual process of interaction between the historian and his or her facts. To illustrate this point Carr (1964) states that. 'To praise an historian for accuracy is like praising an architect for using well-seasoned timber or properly mixed concrete in his building.' (p.10). It is a necessary function but not the main *raison d'être* of an historian. Ultimately the job of a good historian is to rigorously check, compare and question all known facts and information about the topic he or she is researching. Then the evaluation process starts, which includes interpreting evidence, explaining, attributing causes, criticism, tracing results and using the imagination. And it leads not to truth – historians can come to different conclusions – but rather to a valid interpretation.

However, this means that with secondary sources there are now even more concerns since, besides the bias to be found in the original source of information, there is also the writer's bias to contend with. History teachers know that facts become facts when historians decide to make them so, even when not expressing any judgements or opinions, historians are being selective by the very choice of the subject they have picked to work on. As Tosh (1984) says:

The facts are not given, they are selected. Despite appearances they are never left to speak for themselves. However detailed a historical narrative may be, and however committed its author to the re-creation of the past, it never springs from the sources ready-made; many events are omitted as trivial, and those which do find a place in the narrative tend to be seen through the eyes of one particular participant or a small group (p.113).

For a long time historians thought that only the history of kings, nobles and great men was important and therefore our history only dealt with such topics, leaving out whole chunks of the population who, because of their race, class or gender, did not fit this paradigm. This is especially obvious when it comes to women's history. Women have been for a long time, to coin Sheila Rowbotham's (1973) famous phrase 'hidden from history.' With the advent of more and more women historians, women's history began to be written and our perspectives on whole historical periods have since changed.

It is also the historians who decide in what order and context to place the facts and, as any good journalist knows, to influence opinion in one direction you merely have to select and arrange the appropriate facts. Historians are products of their own culture and the society and subject to their own prejudices and values.

History teachers today are aware of the very real difference between 'the past' and 'history', which are often taken to mean by non-specialists one and the same thing, when in fact they are not. It is important to accept that history is merely a discourse about the past but not the past itself and to a certain extent what Jenkins (1991) says is correct.

History as discourse is thus in a different category to that which it discourses about, that is, the past and history are different things. Additionally, the past and history are not stitched into each other such that only one historical reading of the past is absolutely necessary. The past and history float free of each other, they are ages and miles apart (p.5).

For the past 40 years history pedagogy has been developing and today it is dramatically different from the traditional history teaching of fifty years ago. The main objective in history

teaching today is the teaching of history thinking skills and concepts within a historical context, rather than mere memorisation of facts, and pupils are made aware of the main characteristics of the discipline. It is important to teach in history not just the factual knowledge, but what Bruner (1966) called the 'structure' of the subject. Historical method involves historical thinking and it is the analyses of sources in particular that provides the practice for a mode of thinking similar to that which the historian goes through. This approach in history teaching is in fact based on constructivist teaching methods.

Historical thinking is best described as a form of speculation, highly investigative in nature, so many of the learning theories are not immediately satisfactory approaches to history teaching. For example Dewey's problem-solving model, perhaps so useful in subjects like science and mathematics, might be inadequate for Watts says (1972) who says:

... because the material of history is uncertain and debatable, it is difficult, if not literally impossible, to solve problems in history...history is much more concerned with problem-raising than problem-solving. (Watts p.33)

Lee, Dickinson and Ashby showed that children's thinking in history is far more sophisticated than previously imagined. After analysing children's ideas on testing explanations in history, Lee, Dickinson and Ashby (1996) said that:

From the point of view of day-to-day classroom history teaching, our analysis so far suggests that we need to recognise that quite young children can begin to make sophisticated distinctions and develop powerful intellectual tools. We may need both to match such ideas with greater precision in our teaching objectives, and to increase our awareness of assumptions which hold some children back (p.19).

One of the best descriptions of what constitutes good history teaching today is given by Christine Counsell (2004a) and her characteristics of what make good history teachers are summed up below:

1. They consider learning as highly structured and very risky – (children need all kinds of structures to think at a high level – text one minute, picture the next, activity one minute – teachers need time to learn to teach).
  2. They consider variety – (by using many resources to compare sources and interpretations, to access the past and to construct history in different ways).
  3. They value knowledge – (critical thinking and reflection do not mean forgetting the importance of knowledge. We have to connect knowledge and skills).
  4. They establish a critical, informed and open discipline of history – (by its practices, its processes, its values. This to practice casual reasoning and to construct casual explanation).
  5. They select the right stuff – (by supplying a framework of thinking about the kinds of questions we ask about the past and the kinds of historical enquiry).
  6. They put emphasis on evidence and interpretation – (the processes of the discipline) this to establish and examine the truth claims that historians make).
  7. They give joy – (by historical enquiry which establishes curiosity amongst students).
  8. They make various encounters to learn all the time possible – (such as to encounter the other, otherness, the strange and the familiar).
- (pp. 18–56).

This is a very rewarding, effective but difficult kind of pedagogy of history. A pedagogy that can be very successful when delivered by excellent, experienced history teachers but if it is to occur, it has to happen in a subject-centred curriculum and not in an interdisciplinary cross-curriculum one, where the possibility of untrained non- specialist teachers is very high.

As can be seen the debate regarding the nature of history and the best approach to teach it, is quite complex, so considering how volatile history is, how can this be used to pass across the accepted values of a society? Citizenship is concerned with educating pupils on how to become citizens. But what does that mean? Definitely learning values but whose values? In one society citizenship might mean passing across particular dominant religious values, in another it might be ethnic or cultural values and often the top priority of citizenship is to accept the underlying political values of the time. Pushing forward any one set of values, no matter how noble they might be, is the antithesis of history education.

I accept what Cajani (2007) said that 'on the methodological level, the comparison of controversial interpretations and the analysis of documents, fundamental in history teaching, provides students with essential skills for the exercise of citizenship' (p.7) and indeed I have at times used history teaching to target citizenship (Vella, 2006; Vella, 2013). But one has to be very careful. History pedagogy researchers such as Rosalyn Ashby and Peter Lee never claimed history skills necessarily change a person's point of view. For example when discussing their findings on children's understanding and the skill of historical empathy Ashby and Lee (1987) advise against making:

simple-minded and grandiose claims, that prejudice against cultures or ethnic groups will be dispelled by empathy exercises in history at school. People's views are in large part based on material interests, fear, and their social relations with others: the presentation of rational alternatives in education is often almost powerless against all this (p.65).

I would like to think that Ashby and Lee are not totally correct and there is truth in Cajani's statement and I personally definitely believe that history teaching can indeed create people that think on a higher level. With the right history teaching one can get pupils to query the source of their information and its reliability, a trait which is very useful for citizens of a democracy. However the objective of history can never be, as it is in citizenship, to uphold any one system of government even if that system of government is democracy

### **Critical analysis of the benefits of an inter-disciplinary/cross-curricular approach**

History teaching is hard work and requires the right type of pedagogy, which is focused and in depth. Unfortunately it is very difficult, if not impossible, to practice this within an interdisciplinary framework which puts pressure on the very elements that make this possible. But perhaps the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach are worth the effort. So what are these benefits?

Morris (1970) as cited in Ingram (1979) argues that integration is an administrative device, a way of organising the timetable to cope with the expansion of knowledge. But should we abandon good practice for logistical reasons?

A stronger argument in favour is that given by Ranke (1968) who said it is child- centred and by Kelly (1982) who explained that:

demands that the curriculum be made relevant, meaningful and so on have been the most potent factor in the development of the idea of the curriculum integration (Kelly, p.60).

These studies point out that thematic interdisciplinary approaches help pupils to understand day-to-day life and place learning in a context and they do not compartmentalise a child's life.

There is a huge assumption behind these arguments that a subject-centred curriculum resembles one which is authoritarian and where the teacher is the giver of knowledge and the pupils mere recipients, a method which would fall under an Essentialist philosophy, and one which does not take into consideration the child's needs and interests. But this is a false assumption, a history teacher can use a constructivist, child-centred method in a subject-centred curriculum as exemplified by such brilliant history pedagogy as advocated by the work of numerous history teaching researchers (Nichol, and Fines, 1997; Counsell, 2000, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2008, 2011; Dickinson, 1978, 1984; Lee, 1996; Shemilt, 1987; Blyth, J. 1995; Phillips, R., 2002), while respected peer reviewed journals on history pedagogy such as *Teaching History* and the *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research* continually showcase good practice in history teaching within a subject-centred curriculum.

This assumption that better learning occurs in an inter-disciplinary curriculum than in a single-subject one is a very strong one. However there does not seem to be any solid, empirical evidence which backs the theory. The only research study on the effectiveness of cross-curricular teaching versus subject teaching I managed to find is a study conducted almost 20 years ago by Yorks and Folio (1993). This study states that students learn better from thematic, interdisciplinary instruction than from a traditional, single-subject curriculum.

This conclusion is drawn from testing the engagement rates of 254 students learning social studies, reading and maths. in a mixed age classroom of 3rd and 4th graders. By observing these rates, it was demonstrated that there was a higher engagement rate during thematic tuition rather than during single-subject lessons. This may be correct, higher engagement may be occurring more in cross-curricular activities, but this does not necessarily translate into better understanding and learning on the part of the students. What kind of engagement is really happening?

Is interdisciplinary teaching improving the quality of history teaching? It is difficult to say, when empirical evidence is missing. However one source of information is the British government's Department for Education, one place where integrated approaches have long been advocated and practised in classrooms. As early as 1967 the Plowden report was praising this method. 'Integration is not only a question of allowing time for interests which do not fit under subject headings; it is as much a matter of seeing the different dimensions of subject work and of using the forms of observation and communication which are most suitable to a given sequence of learning' (Plowden Report, 1967, p.199).

In Education it takes time before one can see whether a method is producing good results or not, and it was in fact by 1980 that quite unsavoury comments against inter-disciplinary teaching methods began surfacing in various reports by school inspectors. One strong criticism was that there was often no organisation of subject matter and teaching was being done in a random way; thoughtful planning in advance was not occurring. The report of the Scottish Education Department (1980) was very unfavourable. It states that less than half the projects seen were of any real significance where learning was concerned and in an article in the Times Educational Supplement 'projects' which had become synonymous with integrated thematic teaching were highly criticised. Eggleston (1980) argued that topic teaching lacks learning objectives, individual pupil needs are not met and it reduces practice to very basic skills. Eight years later Yendell described thematic approaches as confused thinking, discontinuity, a lack of coherence

and progression, suspect classroom organisation, mismatch and weaknesses in assessment and evaluation (Yendell, 1988 p.39).

More recently Annual Reports of Her Majesty's Senior Chief Inspectors of Schools reported even more alarming results of 'hybrid' integrated courses. In seven of the ten schools visited between 2008 and 2010 in which curriculum changes had been made towards integrated approaches, history, with other foundation subjects, had greatly suffered. For example, as stated in one Ofsted Report

a series of themes was created and history teachers were required to make artificial links to them...so the history curriculum lacked coherence and undermined progression ... schemes of work and lessons were created in which subject specialists had limited or even no input; the result was superficial and simplistic teaching and learning; feedback to students was of limited value because it lacked subject-specific comments about how they might improve ... the work set was not as challenging as when students were specifically taught history in discrete lessons ... with students saying the work was too easy Ofsted Report (2011).

Worrying reports indeed and ones which should not be ignored if the effective history teaching methods achieved in the last 20 years are not to be lost.

### **Conclusion**

Some 14 years ago I was supportive of incorporating history within an interdisciplinary integrated approach (Vella, 2000) but the gap between the rhetoric and the practice has long since made me rethink the validity of this method and I advised great caution when it was recommended that history in Malta's New National Curriculum became one of five subjects that make up one subject, that is, Citizenship Education (Vella, 2009).

Undoubtedly one of the foremost pioneers and advocators of interdisciplinary approaches is Heidi Hayes Jacobs, an American educational consultant on interdisciplinary methods since the early 1980s. It is interesting that even she detects that there can be a problem. She said

Without a commitment to when a skill will be taught, there is no commitment. Furthermore, skills are not taught in a vacuum. They are addressed in application to content, and they are evidenced in a product or performance by the learner (Hayes Jacobs, 1997, p. 4).

In explaining the procedures for curriculum mapping Jacobs makes it clear that to be successful an interdisciplinary/cross-curricular method needs to combine content, skills and performance assessment. She gives detailed and complex case studies that build up learning activities step by step in a developmental fashion. But does this happen in our European schools? All experts agree that when implementing such an approach teaching staff need a lot of support, if interdisciplinary approaches are to be successful. Unfortunately in many cases there is no guarantee that such support is available. Therefore in the case of history one should proceed with extreme caution when implementing an interdisciplinary cross-curriculum approach, rather than gaining the much hoped for benefits it might in fact prove to be the complete destruction of effective history pedagogy.

### **Correspondence**

[yosanne.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:yosanne.vella@um.edu.mt)

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