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ABSTRACT

Understanding U.S. culture is difficult, because the information explosion creates an increase in the number and complexity of various cultural relationships. American Studies is a valuable and unique discipline because it directly addresses this problem, the basic purposes of education, and the relationships that shape students' culture. This document examines the limitations of traditional schemes for organizing academic disciplines and proposes a model that focuses on relationships among disciplines through an emphasis on time. An outline of basic objectives for American Studies is presented that stresses: (1) academic disciplines; (2) personal development; (3) skill acquisition; and (4) aesthetic appreciation. Suggestions are offered for organizing American Studies units, courses, or curricula; and ideas for course content and teaching methods are presented. An example of one teaching method is illustrated, and diagrams are included. (JHP)

A WORKING PAPER ON THE TEACHING OF AMERICAN STUDIES

by

Mark A. Springer
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The Project for American Studies
in the Secondary Schools
(Sponsored by NEH)

An Exploratory Definition

The ultimate purpose of public education is to help students understand their culture and develop skills to live successfully in it. A culture is a complicated system of interrelationships among facts, artifacts, people, experiences and beliefs. To understand a culture is to uncover these interrelationships, to examine their dominant themes, and to explore their development in time.

Gaining an understanding of American culture is becoming more difficult, because the culture itself is becoming more complex. It is undergoing an information explosion which, in turn, is creating an increase in the number and the complexity of the relationships that tie bits of information together. Helping students develop skills to cope with this complexity is a central problem for both public education and the nation.

American Studies is a valuable and unique educational program because it speaks directly to this problem and to the basic purposes of education as well. Rather than isolating specific bits of information and hoping that patterns will emerge, American Studies helps students recognize and define the interrelationships that have shaped the life of their culture.

The Model:

To visualize this method for studying culture, it is necessary to examine the limitations in the traditional schemes for organizing the academic disciplines. In the first scheme, each discipline, preserving its own integrity, looks inward at its specific content rather than outward at the interrelationships that form the culture. Each discipline assumes that mastery of its content when joined with the mastery of other disciplines will produce an integrated education. This model is illustrated in Figure 1.

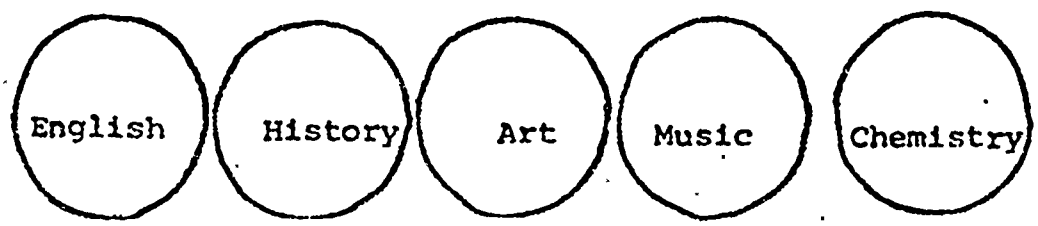


Figure 1: The Independent Disciplines

In the attempt to create a greater degree of interrelationship, the independent disciplines have often been organized into four general areas, or modes of perception: the Language Arts, the Fine Arts, the Social Sciences, and the Natural or Physical Sciences.

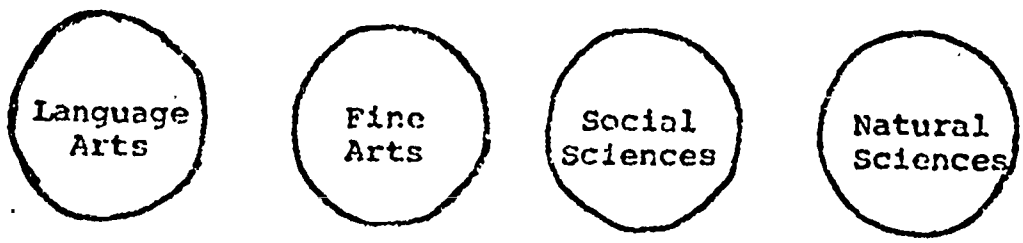


Figure 2: Disciplines Grouped As Modes of Perception

Though this format, as seen in Figure 2, allows students to see some relationships among certain disciplines, it still does not deal with the interrelationships among all four modes of perception.

The recognition of this limitation produces the typical interdisciplinary model shown in Figure 3.

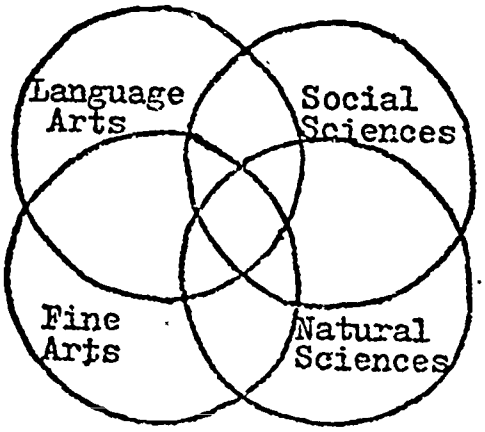
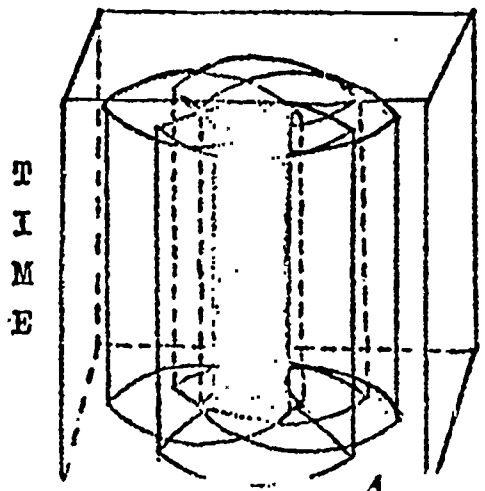


Figure 3: Interdisciplinary Studies Model

In this figure, the potential for dealing with the larger relationships or thematic patterns seems apparent. Several points, however, remain troublesome. First, the system often limits itself to the study of only two modes at a time, such as English and history. Second, the system can actually produce a form of greater fragmentation rather than integration by encouraging overlapping areas to become new disciplines that once again look inward at specific content. For example, sociology overlapping with biology yields socio-biology.

Third, the traditional disciplines are usually organized chronologically, but the interdisciplinary approach (figure 3) does not assure a sense of movement through time. In its attempt to find common points of interest within the disciplines (a similar theme or problem), interdisciplinary studies may lose touch with the chronology of the separate disciplines. Metaphorically speaking, while interdisciplinary studies may produce a still photograph, it often fails to produce a motion picture.

Figure 4 illustrates how American Studies attempts to overcome these limitations by focusing on the relationships among the disciplines through time.



The enveloping cube represents a particular theme or pattern of interrelationships that is to be examined. A culture, then, consists of countless such cubes with their own interrelationships. The central core represents continuity in change, the organizing principle through which, or debate around which, the theme is viewed as it evolves. The core is created by the fluid interaction of all four modes of perception (represented by the cylinders)-which also exist in and through time.

Recognizing that each of the four modes is an integral part of the whole pattern, students of American Studies gather resources that embody aspects of the theme from each mode. They bring these resources together, examine them, and then draw from them a richer, overall understanding of the central theme and its development through time.

Basic Objectives for American Studies in the Secondary Schools

I. ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE: To explore America, its culture, ideals, and achievements, by studying the relationship among the following subjects: literature and the language arts, history and the social sciences, fine and applied arts, and the natural sciences.

II. PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT: To promote the growth of human potentials in the areas of

a. intellectual growth
b. social responsibility (in class, school, and community)
c. recognition of the continuities of experience
d. sensitivity and adaptability to change
e. awareness of origin, place, self

III. SKILLS ACQUISITION: To seek skill development in the following areas:

a. research and problem solving (the ability to define problems or issues, gather and analyze pertinent data, formulate a hypothesis, validate evidence, and synthesize findings into conclusions)
b. critical and creative thought
c. oral and written communication
d. study skills
e. listening skills
f. visual skills (interpretation of paintings, photographs, maps, graphs, charts, globes)

IV. AESTHETIC APPRECIATION: To encourage an appreciation of and ability to articulate judgments about the historical, formal, and emotional significance of the arts in America.

Organization

American Studies may be organized in a variety of curricular and instructional patterns:

I. Framework

A. Unit: American Studies units can neatly merge into existing course patterns. For example, a historian might alter his or her two week unit on the 1920s by infusing American Studies materials—

art, music, poetry—into that unit. Or the teacher might reshape the unit around some basic theme—the Hero in the 1920s—and show how the image of the hero both shaped and reflected the political, social, and economic nature of the decade.

B. Course: Given its variety and flexibility, American Studies can fit into any of a number of individual course patterns. It can be taught as a one or two semester class, either thematically or chronologically. Moreover, a particular theme or time period can be lifted from the core of American Studies and molded into a multi-week mini course or phase elective. Depending on scheduling restrictions, a school might offer a year course on American culture from Discovery through the 1960s or a one-semester course on the American Family or a nine week module on the impact of technology on America since World War II.

C. Curriculum: American Studies can clearly become a core curriculum design for middle and secondary schools. Since such a broad curriculum attempts to assure a commonality of learning, one can set up a sequence of courses, geared to grade and ability level, to illustrate the interrelationships among the disciplines. The curriculum can be integrated through team-teaching, joint planning, or individual classes which infuse American Studies material and methods into the traditional discipline.

II. Content

A. Traditional Disciplines: The traditional disciplines (most often English and History, but sometimes courses like Sociology and Anthropology) may be infused with American Studies methods and materials. The integrity of the base discipline remains whole, but it is broadened and enriched by including comparable artifacts and ideas in other disciplines.

B. Interdisciplinary Studies: Interdisciplinary courses (often theme or problem oriented, such as Ecology) may use American Studies as a way of establishing the topic of a curriculum (the American landscape) and its scope (the changing nature of the American landscape from primitive wilderness to urban wasteland). The advantage of American Studies in such courses is that it investigates the theme or problem within the historical development of American Culture.

C. American Studies: An entire course (or series of courses) may be designed according to the model outlined in Figure 4 (see above). In such instances, any number of disciplines (art, English, history, and science) may organize materials around a common syllabus and explore the major patterns of American Culture as they have developed through time.

III. Method

A. Single Teacher: A teaching situation relying on a single instructor can incorporate American Studies methodology by selecting a topic (a decade, significant generation, issue, problem, or theme) and by examining that topic through a variety of artifacts (historical documents, literature, art, music). The advantage of the single teacher is that he/she integrates this material for the student, thus providing a unified picture of the course content as well as a model for student learning.

B. Team of Teachers in Parallel: This team-teaching situation is characterized by a physical separation of the partners in both time and place. Although all students of one of the teachers are scheduled to meet during the day with the other, joint activities between classes are limited. The team teachers do, however, coordinate plans with each other, organizing materials, methods, and evaluation techniques to meet a single set of objectives. This team-teaching approach allows the expertise of both partners to contribute to the creation of a a clear picture of the American scene, while permitting each teacher the opportunity to provide instruction in the basic skills of his/her discipline.

C. Team-teaching in Blocks: Team-teaching American Studies in two contiguous blocks of time, and coordinated under a single syllabus, provides great flexibility and interaction between team partners and among students. This organizational approach allows the true interdisciplinary nature of the course to be demonstrated clearly by the instructors. The complimentary role of the teachers can be exploited to the fullest as each provides information with regard to content and technique of instruction.

Example:

Let the cube, or theme, be "Growing Old In America: Perceptions of Aging." To understand the pattern of continuity in change regarding this particular theme, the student examines specific artifacts from various areas within the four modes of perception. For instance, poems such as "Old Men," by Ogden Nash, are selected from the Language Arts mode.

Old Men

People expect old men to die,
They do not really mourn old men.
Old men are different. People look
At them with eyes that wonder when...
People watch with unshocked eyes...
But old men know when an old man dies.

Artifacts from the Social Sciences mode are selected, such as these:

Brown County, Minnesota, 1868. A county bill for: "boarding a poor old man...sick and unable to help himself,..; Oliver Mather, son of the old man, had driven him off, and did not want to support him." *

*(McClure, More Than A Roof, cited by D.H. Fischer, Growing Old In America, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 152-53)

and, Living Arrangements of Persons 65 Years and Over: 1975

With Nonrelatives
2%

Inmates of Institutions
5%

With Other Relatives
15%

Living Alone
27%

With Spouse
51%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Examples from other modes, such as paintings, photographs, musical works, and scientific data or description, etc., would also be collected and integrated into this procedure.

The student views the various artifacts and then begins to direct particular questions at them, starting with questions designed to help understand the artifact itself. He might ask of the poem, for example:

> Has the poet used irony to express his meaning? or, Who is the personna?

Of the county bill he might ask:

> What attempt did Brown County make to take care of an elderly man in 1868?

And of the graph he could ask:

> What percentage of elderly persons was living with relatives in 1975?

Questions such as these, perhaps many of them, would be asked to ensure a fundamental understanding of the actual artifact.

Then the student, having gained this basic knowledge of the artifact begins to ask questions that draw out their interrelationships.

> How are the views of the old man that are presented in the county bill similar to or different from the view of old men expressed by the poem's personna? How does the data supplied by the graph relate to or alter our perceptions of the poem or the county bill?

Finally, then, the student begins to question each artifact from the viewpoints of other modes. Could this peem have been written in 1868?

> Could this poem have been written in 1868? How would it be a different poem if it had been written in 1868? What does the fact that we know Ogden Nash wrote the poem do to our view of the attitudes expressed in it? Could the incident described in the county bill occur today? Using all the artifacts, what patterns of continuity in change through time can be described?

Ultimately, this process must go on to include additional resources of the types cited, from other modes, and from various time points as well. Only then will a fuller view and understanding of the pattern as a continuity of change be achieved.