

# Interdisciplinary Teaming: A Collaborative Model for Preparing Middle Grades Teachers

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*Professors from language arts, math, social studies, and science collaborate in the planning and teaching of the Teaching of Specific Subject (TOSS) methods courses to middle grades education majors.*

Picture this: Four middle grades teacher education professors, each representing a different discipline, are sitting around a table planning the content and instructional strategies for an upcoming methods class. The professors identify a theme to which primary concepts of their respective disciplines apply. They construct a plan to address this theme with the large group of students enrolled in the course. This class will be attended and team-taught by all four professors who will later teach the content of their specific subjects to smaller groups composed of the same students. If you were an observer in the planning session described above, you might identify the activity as interdisciplinary planning or collaborative teaching. You might attest that all of the participants contributed knowledge from their respective areas of expertise and that the selected teaching strategies utilized the various teaching styles and talents of the team members. If asked, you would probably guess that such planning would require a lot of time to work out ideas and compromises regarding the themes that should be addressed and the best ways to provide effective learning opportunities.

Since the middle school concept is grounded in team effort and interdisciplinary planning, such a teaching situation is not unusual to see in the team office of a middle school. Considering the degree of specialty of professors and rigorous demands on the time of college faculty, it might seem unrealistic to think that interdisciplinary efforts could be instigated at the college level. However, professors in the Department of Secondary and Middle Grades Education at Kennesaw State College have brought the interdisciplinary teaming model of the middle school into the college classroom.

Professors from language arts, math, social studies, and science collaborate in the planning and teaching of the Teaching of Specific Subjects (TOSS) methods courses to middle grades education majors. The TOSS experience serves as a precursor to student teaching, allowing students to integrate their content and pedagogical knowledge and apply it to a field-based practice. Students enrolled in the TOSS courses meet as a large group twice a week to learn about the central themes identified by the professors. Examples of themes addressed include professionalism and standards, classroom management, and authentic assessment. In addition to

these large group meetings, students meet with the individual professors of their chosen major and minor disciplines for six hours per week and explore those same themes with regard to the specific discipline contexts. An additional twelve hours per week is spent doing field experience in area middle schools.

The large group meetings have been an experience in team teaching in that the planning and teaching of each class requires cooperation and compromise. The very nature of the effort has fostered personal and professional relationships between and among the professors and students and has enabled everyone to see the natural relationships that exist between and among the disciplines. Initially, communication among the professors was a challenge. All had their own discipline jargon and often used the same words which had different meanings or different words that had the same or similar meanings. Their own "sorting out" of language and meaning helped them translate and make connections for their students. Educators often think that students will make the connections among and between the disciplines. The reality is that a good number of educators do not always make these connections. The Kennesaw State professors realized that once educators develop a common language and begin translating discipline jargon, they can more readily facilitate students' abilities to see such relationships and make connections across disciplines.

The professors' diverse teaching styles and personalities matched the variety of learning styles and personalities of the students. However, some of the advantages that are inherent in such a teaching experience may also give rise to some obstacles. Because content and methodology are now under the consideration of more than one professor, that same variety of styles and personalities must be flexible and open to compromise. Sometimes, different ideas of relative importance and emphasis may lead to conflict among team members. Furthermore, cooperation takes time, which is a rare and valuable resource of all college faculty.

Results of student evaluations and feedback from the participating professors indicate that investments in time and compromise are well worth the effort. Indeed, once the process of interdisciplinary planning and teaching is underway, the task is not as difficult as one might initially think, and the process gets easier and more enjoyable with time and experience. Therefore, the idea that the professor of biology might sit down at a table with the professor of English and identify some common themes that can aid students in making connections across disciplines is not so unrealistic. •