

# THE TANDEM COURSE CONCEPT

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**O**n March 5, 1989, the "Teacher Talk" Committee of Leadership Kennesaw presented the second in a series of special faculty programs. Chaired by Gird Romer (History), this program was composed of a panel which included Bob Hill (English), Don Fay (English), Linda Tucker (English), Steve McCullagh (Biology) and Tom Keene (History). The panel discussed the idea of pairing English composition or literature with history or biology, an idea that has been christened "The Tandem Course" concept. This paper is a brief introduction to the topic and is greatly indebted to the members of the panel for their ideas and input.

## Introduction

The growing emphasis on "writing across the curriculum" encouraged a number of faculty members at KSC to experiment with tandem courses; i.e., history or biology paired with an English composition course. The first attempt involved English 101 and History 112 (the second world civilization survey). The success of this combination led to the pairing of English 201 (World Literature) with History 111, but more work is needed in this one. English 102 (the second composition course) in tandem with Biology 104 (the second in the biology sequence) then followed.

The tandem course concept can be divided into three clearly distinguishable parts. First are the practical aspects such as working with the Registrar's Office, scheduling, and other things faculty members do not like to think about. Second are those aspects that

make-up the philosophical reasons for the various course associations. Third is the fun part: How all of this is done in the classroom.

## Practical

It needs to be emphasized that the disciplines retain their integrity. The student receives five hours credit for English and five hours credit for history or biology. The courses are not team taught and methodology is not compromised. However, the students must register for both courses; they cannot take one without the other. The relationship is maintained if they decide to drop. They must drop both.

This type of structure requires close cooperation between the various departments concerned and the Registrar's Office. This is particularly true for the composition and the history because one section of History 112 is combined with two sections of English 101 (40 to 50 students for history, 20 to 25 for English). It may not always be feasible, but teaching the sequence is much easier if all classes meet in the same rooms.

The professors involved should attend their partner's class whenever possible. In the two course relationship this is relatively easy. When two English classes are combined with one history class it is more difficult. Hopefully the English instructors will hold joint sessions periodically thereby making it easier for the history professor. It should be clearly understood that anyone who wants to teach a tandem section will find his or her workload increased, a general rule of thumb is by about one-third.

## Philosophical

One of the more effective ways to remember something is to transfer it

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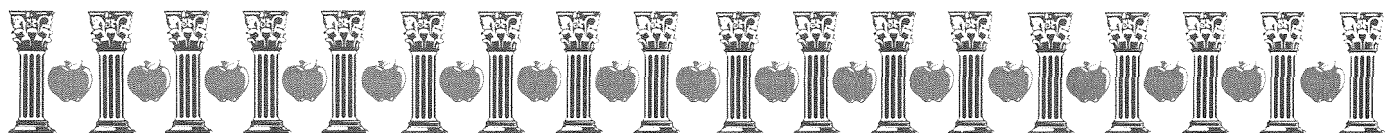
*"A tandem course does increase the workload but ... the rewards make it well worth the extra time."*

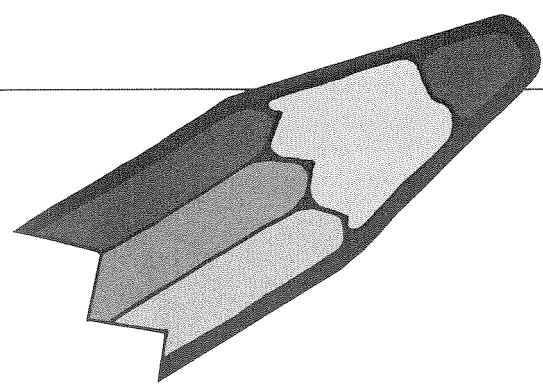
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from brain to paper and, of course, being able to express one's self clearly, verbally or in writing, is necessary for successful job performance after graduation. For those reasons, "writing across the curriculum" needs to be an important part of every course, assuming size makes it feasible. The more practice a student has the better.

English composition teaches such things as exposition, summary, critique, description and attempts to develop effective writing with clear central ideas, good organization, coherence, unity, etc.; all of those things that the faculty member hopes a student will know, but which he or she seldom does. As the quarter progresses, the methods learned in the composition classes are reflected in the student's work in history or biology. The writing is better, the thoughts clearer, and the student is better able to understand what he or she is reading and hopefully learning. The lack of science literacy is a major problem today; the tandem English and biology should help fill this gap in the student's background. Certainly the skills the student

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Sometimes they think that journals are for personal "opinions." Sometimes they think the journal entries should be formal, technically flawless essays; sometimes, personal diaries with embarrassingly personal revelations. Sometimes students think that they have to make one separate entry for each work we read in the syllabus, when in fact, I say that they *could* write every single entry out of one reading, as long as the diligent searching for new details and thoughts persists.

Most often, and disturbingly, students lack confidence in thinking on their own. Reluctant to trust their own minds, they only timidly explore their own experiences in connection with the new knowledge they gain in their courses. Now, I am no fan of students who merely gush over their uninformed opinions and superficial observations, but I remind them over and over that, when they write for me, I want to see "the action of their minds upon the material of the course, their responsible use of others' ideas and information."

I don't want to claim too much for the journal approach, but many of the goals I set forth really are accomplished with most students. Many of them write more and more as the term proceeds. Many are surprised to see that they can think clearly about their own ways of thinking, learning to ask questions, to synthesize, to generate new experiences of the mind with no more time than they formerly spent to sharpen their pencils. Learning smarter rather than harder, one might say.

Finally, it is important to remember that no one kind of writing is sufficient to lead us to write fully and well. "Writing to Learn," "Social Writing," and "Public Writing" all are important to the enrichment and training of the actively literate mind. When students come to understand that not everything is about such topics as "My Summer Vacation" nor "Thomas Hardy's Naturalistic Inevitability," then they may begin to learn how to teach themselves to write. ●

(Tandem ... continued from page 7)

learns in English will aid the history or biology instructor.

The value to the literature or composition course is more subjective. The major benefit seems to be that the history or biology courses provide more substantive material to use as examples and as subject matter for essays and other written assignments. For example, the history or biology text can be used to provide material for learning how to prepare outlines, summaries, etc.

## How it works

Composition courses usually require a number of papers during the quarter. The papers are designed to teach writing skills, the use of sources, how to find the Library and so on. Material such as novels, poems, or essays which relate to the history or biology course are used as sources for the English essays. In history, novels like Voltaire's *Candide* and Erich Marie Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* increase the student's historical knowledge and provide interesting essay topics as well. A good example of a book strengthening the English/biology relationship is Vincent G. Dethier's, *The Ecology of a Summer House*.

English 201 and History 111 create a different series of problems because the association must be very close. The literature selected for English must relate to the subject matter of the history from beginning to end. This requires close cooperation between the faculty members in preparing the syllabi, selecting reading material, and in teaching each class. The potential for this combination is great but needs more work and probably requires true team teaching, which creates new problems.

The final exams in the various classes can be used to tie the courses together. The last test used in history or biology can be revised by the student and used as the English final, although this creates two potential problems. The English final must be scheduled last and the history or biology must be graded quickly. Another method that works

well is to use an essay in English that relates to the history or biology course such as:

To what extent is *Candide* a typical product of the Enlightenment?

or:

In the second essay you should compare and contrast the scientific and literary methods of interpreting the same phenomena. Consider science's and literature's goals and attitudes toward the natural world as well as their means of interpreting the natural world and presenting that interpretation.

## Conclusions

Anyone planning to establish a tandem relationship needs to keep a number of points in mind. (1) There must be close cooperation between the departments involved and with the Registrar's Office. (2) The faculty must preplan and work closely together. (3) The students must understand from the beginning that the courses are combined; they cannot be treated separately. (4) A tandem course does increase the faculty workload, but interested faculty need to remember that almost any course in the college curriculum can be taught in tandem with English, and the rewards make it well worth the extra time.

Reliable statistics have not been developed on grade relationships and whether the students do better or worse in the tandem or in the regular course structure — that is a later project. The primary value seems to be simple. How many times has something like this run through a student's mind? "I thought this was a history/biology [or whatever] class not an English course." The tandem course idea demonstrates that courses and disciplines are interrelated; a student cannot forget everything learned in one class (the infamous "dump valve"?) when he or she goes to another. If the student develops an appreciation of this interrelationship, the entire program is worth the effort. ●

