

# Using a Flexible Schedule for Curriculum Integration

by  
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A non-traditional daily schedule has allowed Wausau West High School to develop a social studies program that has integrated the social studies with a number of disciplines across the curriculum. This flex-mod schedule breaks down several traditional barriers related to time and space, allows teachers to work together, and gives students repeated opportunity to see the interconnectedness of all learning. It has been found in this restructured school that there exists a predisposition toward innovation that is frequently lacking in a traditional secondary school. The environment at West High is one of constant experimentation in which social studies teachers readily risk change. In this situation, teachers find it relatively easy to allow interdisciplinary learning to happen.

The Flex-mod schedule at West High sets both the teachers and the students free from several constraints that one ordinarily finds in a secondary school. For example, classes meet for various lengths of time and are of a variety of sizes depending upon the intended learning outcomes. In a typical week, students participate in a variety of learning situations from large groups lectures to small group discussions, to one-on-one opportunities with individual teachers. Moreover, both teachers and students have about thirty to forty percent of their time unscheduled. There are no study halls. Each day is different and once the rigidity of the lock step traditional schedule is gone, opportunities for innovation readily become apparent. This paper is intended to describe some of the inter-disciplinary innovations that the flex-mod schedule has allowed.

One of the most successful interdisciplinary developments at West High School has been the use of the writing lab. Although located in the English department and staffed full time by writing instructors, the writing lab is viewed by faculty and students alike as the school's writing lab, not the English department's writing lab. A number of years ago, the school's faculty made a commitment to develop student writing in all areas of the curriculum and to provide opportunity for students to use the writing process in all classes. This commitment to writing across the curriculum is not unique to West but the flex mod schedule has allowed its implementation to a rather successful degree. Students use the computer based writing lab as one of the learning places available to them during their unscheduled time. The writing lab is not a place that a teacher occasionally sends a class for one period but a place that is staffed full time by professional writing teachers. During their unscheduled time students use the facilities and the staff of the writing lab as

needed. It is as common to find students in the writing lab working on a health or physical education essay as it is to see students engaged in writing for an English class.

Social Studies courses at West require the students to engage in significant writing on a regular basis. This writing often requires students to use the writing lab. For example, world history students are required to write several research-based papers each semester. At several points along the writing process, these juniors are required to have their work checked by the teachers in the writing lab. This has removed some of the more routine work from the social studies teacher and put it under the responsibilities of the writing teachers. The flex mod schedule allows time for the students and the writing teachers to work on these important aspects of the writing process thereby, allowing the social studies teachers to concentrate on guiding research and evaluating the final writing product itself.

Another interdisciplinary example is that of cooperation between the science department and the social studies instructors. Both history and psychology classes use the school's planetarium for social studies programs prepared by the science department. Specifically in United States History I, all freshmen have an opportunity to view a planetarium presentation on the use of the stars to guide navigation as was done by early European explorers. This thirty minute planetarium simulation provided by science teachers is an integral part of the history exploration unit and more actively engages students in learning than would only reading about exploration.

A second example of social studies-science cooperation is the use of the planetarium by psychology classes. A presentation on perception has been developed by a science teacher that enhances the material students are exploring in psychology.

Another innovation involves cooperation of the science, English and the social studies departments. As part of the unit on pre-Colombian history, students study Native American culture simultaneously in all three disciplines. In U.S. History freshmen study the cultures of the pre-Colombian period, in English the topic is related literature and in the unified science program, the focus is on the impact of technology upon society. The students see the general topic from three different perspectives. Gone are the mostly artificial barriers that the disciplines so often impose on students thinking and in their place are opportunities for higher order thinking that seem to increase almost geometrically. The unit culminates with a day long field trip by the entire freshman class to the Milwaukee Museum. This trip is planned and chaperoned by teachers from all three departments. These types of activities can happen in any school but a strong component of the success has been the fact that the flex mod schedule allows for a degree of common planning time for all teachers involved.

Another example of cross discipline cooperation is found in a writing unit near the end of the freshman year. Each student is required to write a poem about a significant American in the pre-Civil War period. Students are able to seek help

from both their English and history teachers for the project as well as get help in the schools writing lab. Students may wonder is it writing or is it social studies, but more importantly they become increasingly aware that all learning is interconnected.

Interdisciplinary learning and teacher cooperation can take place in any school under a variety of circumstances. All educators probably can think of examples of successful interdisciplinary cooperation but often these instances are short lived because of the great effort it takes teachers to get around the barriers of the disciplines and the time schedule of the traditional secondary school. It has been the experiences of the West High faculty over twenty years that once the barriers of time and space are broken, the turf battles of the various disciplines tend to be significantly diminished. With a restructured time schedule, opportunities for interdisciplinary learning repeatedly present themselves. The movement for an integrated secondary school curriculum seems to be gaining momentum, but as is the case with so many proposed reforms, the widespread use of interdisciplinary learning including the social studies may have to wait for some fundamental restructuring of secondary schools. This restructuring should be based on something other than the lock step, assembly line system of the fifty minute period. After all, students preparing for life and learning in the twenty-first century, deserve something more than a school modeled after a nineteenth century factory.

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