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## Why Are We Here? What Are We Doing? Interdisciplinary Social Studies for the 21st Century

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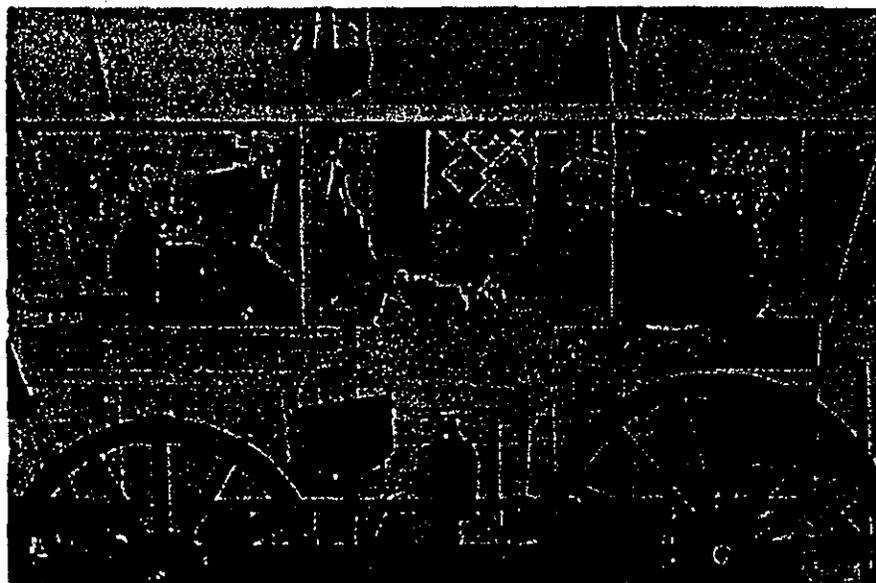
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# Social Studies Journal

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## **The Interdisciplinary Discipline: Social Studies for the 21st century.**

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**Why Are We Here? What Are We Doing?  
Interdisciplinary Social Studies for the 21st  
Century**

**Ann L. Rappaport, Ph. D**

It's the interdisciplinary potential that drew many of us into social studies from the start, isn't it? Because the human condition is, in fact, interdisciplinary. We're attracted by the study of real people and their challenges. We're magnetized by the processes people use to find solutions to a variety of societal problems. It's appealing to learn how people organize to accomplish certain goals. We thrive on diversity, on relationships, on cultural artifacts, on connections. We love the drama of discovery.

*Kids Around Town*, recognized by NCSS and PCSS as Outstanding Program for 1996 and 1995 respectively, uses an interdisciplinary approach to teach young citizens how to responsibly address current public policy issues in their local communities. The program was developed by the League of Women Voters of the Pennsylvania Citizen Education Fund in cooperation with West Chester University and is in its fifth year of implementation in classrooms and communities across Pennsylvania.

Through *Kids Around Town (KAT)*, elementary and middle level students apply their developing skills in language arts, in math, and in science, as well as in economics, geography, sociology, history, ethnic studies, political science, and the arts to enhance their understanding of specific practical problems in their neighborhoods. And through practice across academically defined disciplines, these students grow in their appreciation of how they can effectively use local governmental bodies (and non-profit public agencies) to focus on their concerns and facilitate whatever changes they deem appropriate.

The basic components in the KAT model are:

Selecting a Local Issue to Explore  
Researching the Issue  
Analysis of Research  
Search for Solutions  
Taking Civic Action

**For Real**

KAT isn't a simulation; it's the real thing. And why not? Social studies is the real thing. The excitement of civic participation and/or problem-based learning is in its authenticity.

A couple of examples of KAT projects show issue-based research as a meaningful interdisciplinary approach to education.

- It wasn't obvious to fifth graders in Haverford Township before they identified a problem of litter in and around their school playground that they were launching a research project that could easily satisfy academic standards across multiple disciplines! But their KAT journey to study and remedy the issue they selected involved interviewing adults who had different jobs in the school district and township, writing actual business letters and studying zoning ordinances. The interdisciplinary journey included data gathering and math applications, for without calculations of square feet of land, students couldn't determine for township or school district administrators how many recycling and trash cans would be needed.

Is the problem solved at this time? Not yet. Questions remain about who would maintain and service the receptacles and how much this would cost whom.

How did the students benefit from this approach? It's hard to disagree with the notion that "through problem-based learning, students become better problem solvers because they hone skills such as reasoning, collaboration, and persistence in their self-directed search for solutions" (Checkley, 1997, p. 3).

As capacity of landfills serving the Harrisburg area begins to run out, fifth graders of St. Catherine Laboure School are tuning in. During the past year, this issue brought science, engineering, and technology together with social studies and language arts, and fine arts. Interdisciplinary research revealed to the students that yard waste was a significant ingredient in the land-fill problem. Youngsters learned that community-wide composting could buy valuable time for the landfills, while providing economic and ecologic benefits to the public. Students organized themselves into committees: fact-finding, ordinance study/proposal, news articles production and compost bin research and development. Information was shared and plans were discussed. The students created, conducted and analyzed surveys, met with and compared the advice of different experts in the relevant fields, and even applied for and were awarded a national grant to defray costs for their building materials and public awareness campaign.

Through KAT projects, multiple academic disciplines are learned because they are used in genuine inquiry. The learning is integrated because the questions, and the answers are not bounded by a single subject area paradigm.

### Slaying Demons

#### Fear

But let's face it, just because one loves the idea of inquiry-based, interdisciplinary learning, doesn't mean that one can teach that way with ease and confidence. One new KAT teacher admitted, "I was so scared, I thought I was going to have a stroke." Hers was not the only such confession. Perhaps it's reassuring to hear from Professors Short and Burke that, "We are, and should be, incredibly nervous about inquiry . . . [because] It encourages learners to examine the complexity of issues instead of trying to find simple solutions to complex problems.<sup>2</sup> (Short & Burke, 1996, p. 103).

#### Unknown

One of the demons that interdisciplinary teachers quickly learn to slay is the one that guards the gate to the unknown territories. You don't avoid exploring a content area of interest to your students just because it's not your "area." Instead, you join with students to formulate initial questions and to enlist the support of people who are more experienced in the field than you. You model a search engine, not an answer repository. Then teach students how to become their own search engines.

#### Assessment

A related demon is the control freak disguised as an efficient, rut-loving fanatic for organization, rules, routine and covering the chapters. This demon tries to stop teachers from finding time to do an interdisciplinary, issue-based project. There are many ways to slay this demon. But the most decisive victory comes to those teachers who are willing to look at their assessment vehicles in fresh ways. If you can't name the current lieutenant governor of the Commonwealth, or all the commissioners on your current township board, why is it so critical for your students to recall certain names from historical battles? Maybe both sets of names will be more meaningfully integrated into the lives of teacher and student if the questions change from *who* and *when*, to *what*, *why* and *how*? When our assessments demonstrate that we value interdisciplinary responses, we will have found time to facilitate meaningful, interdisciplinary learning.

#### Order and Management

Order, stability and familiarity are similar demons that try to undermine teachers in their courageous efforts to seek interdisciplinary linkages. They can be slain by the flexibility that encourages minds to wander among more than one academic framework and pose questions which increase uncertainty as often as they narrow it. Students take their cues from the problems they

study, and teachers--as facilitators--take their cues from the students' questions. In a round table debriefing among teachers who'd conducted KAT projects during the 1996-'97 school year, one educator commented, "Some of us hesitate to put decisions in the hands of the children." Another responded, "KAT's not a unit. It's a style of teaching."

### Intellectual Stretching

Productivity and creativity bloom when we stretch the envelopes that house our conventional intellectual disciplines. For instance, Dr. Howard Barrows, chair of Medical Education at Southern Illinois University, recommends that student practice working with "ill-structured problems,"<sup>3</sup> (Checkley, 1997, p. 2). He argues that, too often school settings merely prompt students to plug problems into formula, and the question becomes: which formula do I use here? Instead, Barrows emphasizes more realistic problem-based learning. Such an approach reaches across rigid confines we sometimes call disciplines. Professors Short and Burke speak about the importance of continuous inquiry among educators "who view ourselves and other teachers as professional learners." "KAT guarantees that as a teacher you will grow. It's what we expect of the kids everyday" (Short and Burke, 1997, p.102).

### Building in the Time and Space

Sometimes educators voice the desire to conduct interdisciplinary lessons, but they falter on the "hows" of implementation. The *Kids Around Town* model is helpful in suggesting direction.

What do we skip in order to fit in KAT? This is a common question, but it's not really a productive one if we're sincere about conducting interdisciplinary inquiry. Have we ever truly "covered" in class everything our students need to know? We harm our discipline and related fields if we see these studies in competition

with each other. Instead, we should be emphasizing to students the aspects of these disciplines that they'll need in order to independently pursue their depths. And certainly, there's nothing to stop us from writing out our sets of compelling questions whose discussion time didn't allow. We can include a recommended resource list, and bid our students fond initiative. In the worst case scenario, we learn what we preach: to accept certain "tradeoffs" as part of the authentic human story we're trying to impart. We concentrate on what is essential from the past in order to help us create a better future.

With KAT it is possible -- even occasionally desirable -- that the youngsters get so carried away with their interdisciplinary study of a local public policy issue -- say, potholes -- that, yes, the teacher runs out of class time to "cover" something that an unenlightened assessment tool will measure. In a better case scenario, KAT teachers use the KAT issue selected as the vehicle to navigate among relevant disciplines and apply their lessons. Since we mentioned potholes, we'll stick with that example to see how they can cut across practically every area you could responsibly want to teach. Clearly potholes can be seen as an application of principles learned in physical science. Their origin derives from changes in temperatures, weight and vibration pressures, material composition, de-icing treatments. Clearly there are mathematical ways to understand these factors and communicate these relationships. Clearly potholes are simultaneously significant political, economic and public policy issues. In what jurisdiction are they located? Who's responsible? What criteria are used by that responsible entity to determine when to go for short-term repair or longer-term road repaving? What de-icing method is best for each interested constituent community (consider taxpayers, environmentalists, transportation-dependent businesses)? What damage is worth enduring to save repair costs (flat tires, shipment losses, personal injury)? Inherent in these questions are many underlying issues of\*

social studies: in the history, ecology, economics, demographics, power and decision-making processes, conflict, strategy and more. Inherent to these questions are also the opportunities for social studies to reach across other disciplines and demonstrate important applications.

The point is that KAT can fit into the curriculum without necessarily "adding" another program that requires its own time slot. KAT is an effective mechanism by which many disciplines can be experienced.

Another place KAT fits in is in the realm we now refer to as "service learning." Unfortunately, too many of us view service learning more narrowly than we should if we hope to capitalize on its interdisciplinary potential. KAT goes beyond the definition operationalized in the April 1997 statistical analysis reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics: that service learning "provides structured time for a student to think, talk or write about what the student did and saw during the actual service activity."<sup>4</sup> (Chandler, 1997, p. 2)

KAT projects demand more of students and teachers than the debriefing expected by the typical service learning requirement. But in these demands are found deeper interdisciplinary learning.

For example, take the KAT topic that began as a community service project pairing fifth graders in Wallenpaupack with adults who have disabilities and live in a local group residence. Such a project offers positive benefits through listening and communicating, developing games, crafts and other social and therapeutic activities, followed up by serious, structured reflection on the experience. The KAT model moves as interdisciplinary service activity into an interdisciplinary study, complete with a multidisciplinary academic context.

Some of the questions KAT asks up front help guide the project's framework: Why is X service being provided by whom?

How much demand is there for X service in this community and how do we know? Is that typical across the country or world? How do other communities meet those demands? What are the advantages and disadvantages of alternative approaches? Are there public or private competitors providing this service? How much unmet need is there? Throughout such a study, KAT students are encouraged to think about county government and welfare structures, transportation, the environment, demographics, religion, philosophy, the economics of private/public sector, employment and wage issues, housing, medical insurance. They have rich opportunities to apply math skills, to consider public health issues, to engage in adaptive communications technology as well as traditional language arts. When it comes time for KAT kids to reflect on their experience, they'll have more information to draw on and upon which to base their impressions. They are also in a stronger position to perform their interdisciplinary job of citizenship.

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