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School of Education at Johns Hopkins University-The Interdisciplinary Project Model: A Workable Response to the Challenges of Multicultural Education In Our Nation's Secondary Schools

by Jere Mendelsohn and Fredrick J. Baker

## The Challenge

"An archipelago of ethnic, cultural, racial, and socioeconomic islands." -Carey McWilliams describing Los Angeles

In 2002, to say that major urban school districts face daunting challenges is an understatement of epic proportions. Los Angeles Unified School District, the second largest in the nation, contains 650 schools, which cover over 700 square miles and serve a student population of close to three quarters of a million. Los Angeles is a major magnet for immigrants from across the globe, drawn by its historic promise of freedom, glamour and opportunities for success. It is the children of these families who form the majority in Los Angeles schools. Of the many hot issues currently being debated in districts such as Los Angeles, those which fall under the umbrella of multiculturalism evoke some of the most passionate responses from every constituent group: parents, teachers, administrators, policy makers, students and the general public. Multicultural education is tied directly to our collective history and self-image; it cuts to the very heart of what it means to be American.

Public schools serve as a microcosm for the currents, which run through society. As our society struggles with its own metaphor for its collective self (i.e. "melting pot," "mixed salad"), the schools are left to sort through the more practical, down-to-earth matters: which subjects, language, concepts, etc. are important to all students in a multiethnic society. Nowhere is this challenge more evident than in Los Angeles. Each of the communities, which comprise Los Angeles

...has felt the effects of a recent restructuring of the economy that has, in wild fluctuations, transformed the social and fiscal terrain of Southern California-- some communities accumulating great wealth; many others sliding into decline. And most communities have felt the astounding, not unrelated, wave of demographic changes taking place over the last twenty years: immigrants from Armenia, Cambodia, China, Colombia, El Salvador, Iran, Korea, Mexico, the Philippines, Russia, Thailand, and Vietnam...forming a linguistic and cultural mix that has affected every institution in the Basin: social services, the churches, the schools. There are over ninety languages spoken by the students in the Los Angeles Unified School District. (Rose 1995)

A major question faced generically by educators, and specifically by classroom practitioners, is **"How can students within culturally complex districts such as Los Angeles best be supported in their cognitive and affective development?"** While the public and professional conversations around this question are often as complex as the question itself, workable and practical solutions may not be nearly so complicated. An interdisciplinary project model is one

such solution (but certainly not the only one). Four key concepts should serve as a project's foundation and should be addressed before introducing the project itself: multicultural education, world views levels of analysis, project-based learning, and interdisciplinary connections. What follows are summaries of these concepts which support the building of interdisciplinary projects in secondary school classrooms.

## **Multicultural Education**

The demographic changes previously described are evident throughout most major American cities and their school districts, with Los Angeles at the forefront of these changes. In public education, one result has been the emergence of multicultural education, a field which itself mirrors the level of cultural fragmentation evident in society. There exist many definitions of multicultural education. For example, one prominent teacher education text offers the following perspective:

Education that focuses on providing equal opportunity for students whose cultural and/or language patterns make it difficult for them to succeed in traditional school programs; Many multicultural programs also emphasize positive intergroup and interracial attitudes and contacts... However, it should not be inferred that (multiculturalism) is intended only to bolster the self-image and enhance the learning of minority students. Among its most crucial purposes is to ensure that each group of students acquires knowledge and appreciation of other racial and ethnic groups.... For years to come, the goal of attaining equal opportunity through multiculturalism will continue as a prominent theme in US education. (Ornstein and Levine, 1993)

Francesina Jackson describes a multicultural approach to education founded upon the following criteria: building trust, becoming culturally literate, building a repertoire of instructional strategies, using effective questioning techniques, providing effective feedback, analyzing instructional materials, and establishing positive home-school relations (1994). Christine Sleeter offers a slightly more radical, politicized concept, stating that multicultural, multi-lingual approaches "focus on helping students of color, low-income students,... assimilate in society; fostering positive interpersonal relationships among diverse groups in the classroom; raising consciousness about a group by teaching its history, culture and contributions; reconstructing the education process to promote equality and cultural pluralism..." (1993).

The Iowa Department of Education's criteria for multicultural education mandates that students understand themselves and others as cultural beings, recognition of diversity domestically and globally, the effects of group membership and the dynamics of discrimination (Thompson, 1993). Alan Singer (1994) frames the multicultural education debate in terms of who hold power in society, and urges educators to address within the curriculum larger issues of racial divisions and economic/class fragmentation. He also advocates the exploration of the "increasing disaffection of our youth." Robert Hassenger warns that multiculturalism, while important to understanding qualities inherent in every society, threatens to obscure academic programs with issues which are essentially political in nature (1992).

Multicultural education has its supporters who are discipline specific: Anthony Seeger (1992) advocates music (live and recorded) as a forceful tool for promoting learning, while Harold Best (1994) views dance and other fine arts as a major vehicle for promoting "renewed cultural elegance" among people of various ethnicities.

Multicultural education is by no means a universally accepted approach. While space prohibits an exhaustive presentation of its critics, one asserts that multicultural education has been "overshadowed by bitter debate...which has heightened racial and ethnic tension" (Banks, 1993). Another characterizes arguments for multicultural education as "flimsy, inconsistent and silly" (Sowell, 1993). As if the field isn't sufficiently crowded, multicultural education also subsumes conversations around such topics as Afro centric curriculum, bilingual education, phonics verses whole language, creationism, religion, gender bias, Japanese models of education, Euro centrism, antibias curriculum, global education-and the list goes on, ad infinitum.

Central to this ongoing national discussion over multicultural education is how it manifests itself, day to day, in classrooms such as those found in Los Angeles and other metropolitan districts. The interdisciplinary project addresses the issue of multiculturalism in two important and practical ways. First, the project should employ a variety of instructional methodologies proven effective with students whose learning is impacted by challenges posed by language and culture. Second, the project supports the pluralistic ideals of multiculturalism by recognizing the inherent value of each of the cultures, which, together, comprise American society. While projects are by no means all things to all advocates of multiculturalism, they offer one way for the classroom teacher to sort through this complex and lively debate, and focus on its most important element; the students.

Next, a potent tool afforded the classroom practitioner comes from the field of international relations. Known as worldviews level of analysis, this approach offers helpful insights into students' learning capacities and further supports interdisciplinary projects.

### **Worldviews Levels of Analysis**

An essential idea in most multicultural approaches to education is the inherent worth and dignity of the represented culture and the individuals who comprise them. Woven into the political fabric of American democracy are ideas embedded within our social compacts (i.e. the Constitution, Bill of Rights, common laws), which elevate and celebrate the individual. Uniting both of these concepts is the worldview. A worldview is defined as "A set of values, assumptions and core beliefs that individuals use to interpret the world around them: the lens that the individuals use to describe and explains issues, events and conditions" (Lamy, 1995).

Taken from the field of international relations, worldview theory essentially states that if there are five billion people on the planet, then there are five billion worldviews. One's worldview is shaped by one's experience of people, places and events. Moreover, these experiences take place in a dynamic world where individuals, societies and nations engage in an endless dance of cooperation, competition and conflict.

It follows that each student and teacher possesses his/her own worldview, forged by past experiences and continually evolving with each new experience (both in and out of class). Contrasting worldviews are bound to exist in the multicultural or multilingual classrooms typically found in cities such as Los Angeles. By better understanding each student's worldview, the teacher is more effectively able to tailor his/her methodologies. The Levels of Analysis model can be an effective tool for analyzing multiethnic and multilingual environments, and for understanding the myriad forces, which shape individual students' worldviews.

Each student has a worldview expressed primarily through spoken and written language. An individual's worldview, while not static, can be analyzed on four general levels: personal, domestic, systemic and global. These criteria are not mutually exclusive, but intersect in dynamic ways to influence how one perceives, feels about and expresses him or herself. These factors are intimately related to such areas as language use and development, in that each influences how and why students develop-or don't develop- language competency. Following are examples of factors, which influence students' worldviews. They are grouped by corresponding levels of analysis, and could be used by an instructor on formulating units, lessons and longer-term projects:

### **Level One: Personal (Individual)**

- Mother's access to prenatal care; General health and current access to health care.
- Chronological age and birth order.
- Gender.
- Corresponding levels of cognitive and affective development.
- General psychological make-up; Left and right brain functions.
- Physical, emotional and /or learning disabilities.
- Personal interests; amounts of time spent reading, talking on phone, watching TV, etc.
- Innate talents and /or skills.
- Personal learning styles; multiple intelligences.
- Personal sense of self-esteem, ethics, morality, spirituality.

### **Level Two: Domestic (Home and family)**

- Current family composition (Presence of mother/father, # of siblings; extended family).
- Family communication dynamics (warm/talkative versus cold/abusive; time spent together versus time spent alone).
- Economic status; number of people currently employed.
- Income and expenditures; purchasing priorities;.
- Educational level of family members; academic, vocational and "real life" training.
- Type and location of family dwelling.
- Primary means of communication within the home, i.e. language(s) spoken, nonverbal cues, writers, artists, storytelling, etc.
- Level of dysfunction in home: drugs/alcohol, verbal/physical/sexual/emotional abuse.

### **Level Three: Systemic (Village/tribe/nation)**

- Educational systems: School attended, quality of schools, federal, state and local educational objectives, level of safety in school, access to remediation, tutoring, etc.
- Economic/consumer systems: Level of employment, types of local retail outlets available, availability of credit and financing.
- Government systems: economic aid (WIC, ADC, Social Security, etc.), police/probation, immigration status, access to information/libraries, access and exposure to technology (TV, radio, Internet, etc.).
- Federal, state, local legislation and policies.
- Current political and social climate-local and national.
- Current and historic levels of acceptance, rejection, racism, class bias, prejudice, etc.
- Influences of "American culture," popular and consumer culture versus culture of origin.

#### **Level Four: Global (International/interdependent)**

- Culture and ethnicity of origin.
- 1st, 2nd, 3rd generations living in US; chronological distance from immigrating experience.
- Level of family's ties to country/culture of origin; influence of culture beyond US borders.
- Cultural markers: primary language, religion, values, dress, food, nature, family ties, etc.
- "Assimilation" versus "acclimation"; "melting pot" versus "mixed salad/stew" theories.
- Current relations between US and family's country/culture of origin.

Any one of these factors has the potential to exert a major influence on each student's worldview, yet most classroom teachers are not privy to the details of students' lives, which would offer unbounded insight into their worldviews. However, much can be learned through conversation, journals, and projects, which ask students to create a personal statement by assembling a variety of components. In addition to observation, listening, and providing appropriate assignments, good teachers possess intuitive qualities, which allow them to create educated guesses as to the factors influencing student proficiency.

The levels of analysis approach serve two important functions. Applied "inwardly," the levels of analysis approach is one way teachers can raise relevant issues and questions about students in a multiethnic/lingual setting which will guide the teaching of those students. The results of that teaching will provide further insight, and so on. Applied "outwardly," the levels of analysis provides a rich basis for creating an interdisciplinary project where students can pursue an area of study in which they examine personal, domestic, systemic and global aspects.

#### **Project-based Learning and Interdisciplinary Connections**

Teachers using long-term projects is not a new idea. In the early 1900's, Smith's Agricultural School is documented as having instituted a project-based approach to instruction (Alberty, 1927). Projects take on added dimensions when infused with an interdisciplinary approach, and can be utilized as the ongoing focus of a unit, semester, or year, or as the culminating exhibition of an interdisciplinary unit. A project provides a forum for students to demonstrate mastery of important concepts and skills through the practical and creative application of those concepts and skills, rather than rote memorization and testing.

Effective projects are built on inquiry, the asking of important questions. Facts, figures, theories, constructs, opinions-no data can exist without the questions, which precede, produce and follow them. By asking and pursuing important questions students are transformed from passive receivers of information into active learners, thinkers and problem-solvers. Through inquiry, students take ownership of both knowledge and the knowledge-gathering process. Consequently, the project can be structured in the form of a series of questions, to which students are encouraged to add (and answer) their own.

Project learning has been defined as "securing learning (i.e. the acquisition of knowledge, habits, skills, ideals, etc.) indirectly by means of activities which have either following characteristics; goals attained through concrete results or accomplishments, and essential learning as a byproduct of the activity (project) itself" (Bickel, 1994). Lillian Katz (1996) further describes projects as "an in-depth investigation of a topic worth learning more about...The key feature of a project is that it is a research effort deliberately focused on finding answers to questions...The goal of a project is to learn more about the topic rather than to see right answers to questions posed by the teacher."

A compelling final format for interdisciplinary projects is an exhibition. Exhibitions are special events where a community of scholars pulls together in a meaningful way. Exhibitions generally have three major components: written, visual and live presentations/demonstrations. They may be group or individualized exhibitions. Although components vary from project to project, exhibitions afford students an opportunity to demonstrate and celebrate their knowledge and talents, those elements, which noted educational reformer Theodore Sizer calls "standards of intellect" (Sizer, 1985).

Through the use of backwards planning, "exhibitions drive the curriculum" (Sizer, 1992). Well-crafted projects allow students to make a variety of interdisciplinary connects, and enable them to make those connections in ways appropriate for them. Experience has shown that the interdisciplinary project is not merely something students should act upon, like a worksheet or a book report. The project itself should be designed in such a way that it acts upon the student as well, forcing him/her into situations where not only learning, but learning about learning, takes place.

In order for this type of interaction to occur, specific elements should be present in the design of an interdisciplinary project. These include a project rationale, essential questions driving the project, specific criteria to show mastery, specific deadlines for project components, a means of exhibition and expression, assessment rubric/checklists, a means of self-assessment and documentation, and universality (real-world connections). Instructors, students, or some combination of the two can design any or all of these elements.

Assuming that these elements are present, the type and scope of the project is once again dependent upon the particular focus of the team, the interests of the students and the situation at the school. For example, at New York's Satellite Academy, only part of the day is blocked off for integrated work, while at Catalina Foothills High School in Tucson, Arizona, students run public health "clinics" in an ongoing, integrated project centered on the study of biology. At the Bright

Ideas School in Wichita Falls, Texas, students work through two-week integrated projects built around the theme "Connections Between Cultures."

Like other schools, Bright Ideas has devised a paradigm, or template of a model, which can be revised and used many times in the service of integrated studies (1995). At Sequoyah School in Pasadena, California, extended camping trips provide junior high students myriad ways to cross subject-area boundaries. At the International Polytechnic High School (I-POLY), located on the campus of Cal Poly, Pomona, individual and group projects are providing stimulating and meaningful learning opportunities to students in multicultural/lingual classrooms (Baker & Mendelsohn, 1996).

These projects are truly integrated in that they not only blur the lines between disciplines, but they link valuable ideas about learning and understanding, performance and assessment, community and individual responsibility, as well as redefine teacher/student roles as they relate to those ideas. Moreover, they force students and teachers to constantly question the value and efficacy of what they are doing, and to rethink and revise when needed. Hence, projects are truly alive.

### **Summary**

As with so many other parts of education, ideas for interdisciplinary projects are limited only by the imagination, time and resources of the learning community. A variety of instructional methodologies will need to be incorporated into projects, including visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic. These too, can be modified to suit the needs of specific students. The authors sincerely wish that the use of projects will contribute in a positive way to the challenges faced by practitioners working within multicultural/lingual settings, and that they invite teachers and their students to celebrate diversity and the joys of inquiry and learning.

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### **About the Authors**

Fred Baker is a Professor of Education in the College of Education and Integrative Studies at Cal Poly Pomona University. An international educator, he has lived in economically developing countries for over 12 years. He is the author of over 100 publications and has received his university's Outstanding Advisor Award and Outstanding International Scholar Award.

You can contact Fred via email at [FJBaker@CSUPomona.edu](mailto:FJBaker@CSUPomona.edu). He can also be contacted by writing to the following address: Department of Education, College of Education and Integrative Studies, Cal Poly Pomona University, Pomona, CA, 91768, USA.

Jere Mendelsohn is a teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District. He has been creating interdisciplinary curriculum and projects for over 15 years, and was a founding faculty member of the International Polytechnic High school located on the campus of Cal Poly Pomona. Jere holds a BS degree from Northwestern University and an MA from Cal Poly Pomona.