Crossing Borders:

A Cross-Curricular Approach to Teaching

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Abstract

A cross-curricular approach to teaching includes knowledge, and skills from various subject areas. When lessons connect multiple subjects, students can gain a deeper understanding of the different subjects taught daily. Learn how teachers can collaborate to develop new and exciting lessons, activities, and projects that can expand learning across disciplines.

Crossing Borders: A Cross-Curricular Approach to Teaching

In an interdependent world, where there is mutual dependence that exists between nations, people, and the environment, education can be enhanced when it is compatible with this global relationship. Cross-curricular teaching (also referred to as interdisciplinary teaching), aims to apply knowledge, principles, and/or values to more than one academic discipline simultaneously. This method of teaching can benefit students across all grade levels because it will allow them to make connections between the various subjects they learn in school. These connections can allow learning to be relevant to the everyday lives of our future generations of learners. Furthermore, Islamic Schools are independent learning institutions that have the flexibility needed to implement this method of teaching.

As Islamic Schools in North America continue to progress, and improve the curriculum to meet the standards of 21st century learning, there are ways to facilitate cross-curricular learning in any school. School administrators can begin by providing professional development on cross-curricular teaching, and learning to the entire faculty (administration included). This training can be conducted by educators who are experienced with this technique, and who can provide guidance, and resources for the faculty. Prior to the training, faculty at all grade levels, and subjects can evaluate the methods of instruction currently used. This evaluation of teaching will assist in understanding the learning climate at the school, and to sort out which methods are effective, and ineffective. The faculty, and administration should be tuned in to the learning needs of the students, and how they can work together to establish learning communities that are successful. This “learning audit” can take school days, weeks, (even months!) to complete. However, it is necessary to establish clear and consistent learning goals that will be enhanced with the cross-curricular teaching approach.

When a school begins planning for cross-curricular learning, division and grade level meetings are helpful. In these meetings, all subject teachers can share monthly curriculum goals to see where different subject matter can fit into lesson plans. Discussions can present opportunities where certain topics or landmark projects can be connected between the subjects that are being taught. Please note, that this planning includes **all** subjects: Languages, Religious studies, Physical Education, and electives. Interdisciplinary teaching gives educators the chance to broaden learning, and to encourage students to think and reason on these integrated lessons. Therefore, grade level meetings will allow subject teachers share monthly curriculum goals to see where different subject matter can fit into lesson plans. This detailed planning, can also allow teachers to learn the value of *all* the subjects, not just their own.

Once teachers decide which subject they want to work with, plans can be made to create an effective lesson plan. There should be a common theme between both subjects, in order to establish learning objectives that are clear, practical, and effective. Subjects that do not usually work together, such as Math and English, or Social Studies and Islamic Studies, can use a common theme to support each other. Instruction can include a formal lesson, class activity, or an assigned project. Teachers work together to decide what methods can be used to evaluate student learning, and which assessments are suitable.

Students need to be prepared when a cross-curricular lesson/activity is introduced. They **should** be aware of why they will learn using the new approach, how they learn, and how they will be assessed. This will allow students to understand what the expectations are, and to also recognize that they are supposed to learn how the multiple subjects are interconnected. The necessary resources should be provided to students, to guide, and track progress. In order to evaluate the interdisciplinary approach after lessons are given, teachers can hold follow-up meetings after the lesson to discuss progress and to share feedback, and resources (ex: scoring rubrics, learning tools that were used).

Over the past couple of years, Noor-Ul-Iman School (a Pre-K-12th grade Islamic School), has used cross-curricular teaching within the Middle School students (6th-8th grades). One example is the Landmark Project, a project that was planned by the 7th grade Math, Social Studies, and English departments. The objective of the project was to examine different landforms throughout the world. The Social Studies objective of the project was to examine the historical significance of the landmark, and to research the demographics, and geography of the surrounding area. The Math objectives were to graph, and measure the landmark, and to create a 3D model. The English objectives was to evaluate the student's’ ability to write a research paper.   
 The project took one month to complete; a different due date for each teacher. The students received three grades for this project, one for each class. Students were able to work independently on this project, but still received help from their teachers when necessary. The Landmark project was a learning experience for the students, as well as the all the teachers involved. It was an effective assignment, mainly because students were able to learn more about the topic when combined with multiple subjects.

Cross-curricular learning can enhance the learning of all subjects; academic, and non-academic. In order for this instruction to be successful, the administration, department heads, and teachers need to collaborate, and share their resources, and expertise. Teachers at the different grade levels can create long term curriculum goals to integrate the cross-curricular approach consistently throughout the school year. Cross-curricular instruction can enhance the traditional “isolated” learning approach, to all students, grade levels, and learning styles.

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Biography

Zakia Rodriguez is a Social Studies teacher at Noor-Ul-Iman School, New Jersey. She received a B.A. in History at Rutgers University, NJ. She is a certified Teacher of Social Studies in New Jersey. She completed the National Geographic FLOW Education program (Facilitating Learning through Outdoor Watershed Education), to teach students the significance of watersheds. She works towards integrating essential topics into the Social Studies curriculum such as the environment, global citizenship, and technology. Her current projects include working on becoming a Google Certified Teacher, and training with the U.S. Green Building Council, to receive certification as a Green Classroom Teacher.