CURR 440: Teaching Reading in the Content Areas

Interdisciplinary Collaboration Project: Overview and Description

Collaborating between an 11th grade English and social studies classroom, this interdisciplinary unit strives to teach students the importance of activism and the power of one’s own voice through the African-American Civil Rights Movement and a critical literacy lens on poetry. The English section narrows in on students’ ability to analyze the effect of literary elements and determine author’s purpose. To do so, it integrates informal Critical Lens practice and summarization activities in relation to the history class’s Twitter feed. Leaning on research and discussion, the social studies classroom highlights important activists and key events of the movement by requiring the synthesis of primary and secondary source analyses. And summarization, as aforementioned, is a reading strategy also promoted by the ELA section. By reading classical and modern-day poetic commentaries on political and social issues, English expands student thinking about the role poetry can play in the world. Simultaneously, social studies provides historical examples of nonviolent activism. Ultimately, the two content areas work together to modernize the African-American Civil Rights Movement, enabling the interdisciplinary unit to tap into the rationale behind the movement and illuminate the timeless necessity of awareness, activism, and perseverance.

As one of the first activities in social studies, students summarize two informational texts on an assigned African-American civil rights activist, guided by the skeletal framework of a Biopoem and/or Bio-Pyramid. These student-generated poems are immediately shared in a Jigsaw Activity, but also reappear later in the ELA section of the unit as the preparatory texts for students’ final online poem analyses. Avoiding redundancy, the biopoems’ reintegration serves two purposes: to scaffold students into the blog critiques of their peers’ final project slam poems; and to refresh students’ memory of the key African-American activists, increasing the likelihood they will understand the allusions to them in the Fishbowl Discussion. Just as the biopoem blog activity is lower-risk practice for students’ online slam poem critiques, the bipoems themselves are students’ first experience with poetry creation, instilling cross-curricular scaffolding for ELA’s slam poems and validating the biopoems’ heavy reliance on the premade structures.

Furthermore, as the primary components of the unit’s two cross-curricular activities, both the ELA slam poems and the historical biopoems are the writing-based products of reading assignments. Therefore, they “integrate reading and writing…because…each process reinforces the other and can lead to improved comprehension and retention of the subject area content” (Alverman, 2001, p. 11). Not only connecting those reciprocal processes, the biopoems and slam poems physically merge two content areas: They transform historical, informational texts into poetry, a literary genre. In terms of form, the output of both activities is qualitatively different than their input. Lastly, with each integrated into at least one of the lessons for each discipline, both poems serve dual peer-teaching roles, teaching both social studies and English content to their classmates. When used in history’s Jigsaw Activity, the biopoems teach peers about civil rights activists, but when they appear on the English blog, they teach students operational technology skills and how to appropriately respond to peer-generated texts. The slam poems teach students about modern day racism in the social studies Fishbowl Discussion, but when used in English, they teach students’ how poems use literary elements to reinforce theme and clarify author purpose.

Despite it technically being a requirement of only the ELA summative assessment, the slam poems have cross-curricular content and purpose, so the assignment is set up so that it receives presentation time and work time in each discipline. In terms of presentation time, the slam poems launch the social studies Fishbowl Discussions because they are political commentaries on modern-day racism topics that loosely correlate with the historical Fishbowl Discussion topics. Additionally, as poems with purposeful literary element integration to establish a theme, tone, and purpose, the slam poems receive an ELA platform: they are shared via blog for peer analysis of the aforementioned literary elements. In terms of work time, students’ in-class assembly of their ELA final projects will be bookended with time in their social studies class. Students will devote one of the allotted social studies research days to gathering information about their slam poem topic and will have a writing workshop period in social studies. These two days add to the two days allotted to slam poem writing in English. Rather than confining their slam poem creation to the English classroom, reserving two days in social studies reinforces the project’s overlap by putting an equal emphasis on the poem’s accurate portrayal and summarization of a modern-day racism topic as it does on its purposeful integration of literary elements. Since effective teaching discourages students from relying on teachers and promotes student use of the content-area texts as their “sources of information” (Alverman, 2001, p. 14), the work time in social studies was organized under the belief that it would grant students the ability to work with a teacher more able to help students navigate their reading of the informational texts from which they must generate their slam poems.

Despite how Twitter’s starring role is in the social studies classroom during the final Fishbowl Discussion, Twitter appears in the English section of the unit not only to familiarize students with tweets prior to that Fishbowl Discussion, but also to develop ELA skills, like summarizing and Critical Lens quote interpretation. ELA’s use of this atypical form for Critical Lens practice offers students a glimpse into the new ways that quote interpretation is demanded by today’s world, since it is important to show students how “new technologies are fundamentally and irreversibly affecting how ideas get represented in texts and communicated” (Alverman, 2001, p. 16). Additionally, ELA’s use of tweets merely breeds student familiarity with the appearance, language conventions, and current use of Twitter prior to their Fishbowl Discussion. With the “Promotional Tweet” requirement in the ELA final project, the English unit further capitalizes on the social studies class’s Twitter feed. Not only are there slam poems presented at the social studies Fishbowl Discussion, but a “Promotional Tweet” asks students to use the social networking site to summarize and hashtag a key phrase from their slam poem as a lead-in to, and preview of, that presentation. With this unit planned for students of the “Net Generation” (Alverman, 2001, p. 16), Twitter’s use as a discussion and summarization tool in both disciplines helps to create engaging “school literacy tasks [because]..the gap between school and home/community environment is bridged” (Alverman, 2001, p. 15).

In this interdisciplinary unit, students ultimately create their own texts that necessitate a purposeful use of literary elements to make a specific point about modern-day racism. Therefore, they will not only apply their in-class poetry analyses to their own writing and synthesize informational texts, but they will receive the opportunity to express themselves in a similar fashion to how Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or Maya Angelou used their voices. This modernization of the African-American Civil Rights Movement exposes the timelessly noble values on which the historical movement was founded, thereby highlighting the importance of studying – and learning from – the past.

References

Alvermann, D. E. (2001). Effective adolescent literacy instruction. [Executive summary and paper commissioned by the National Reading.] Chicago, Ill. National Reading Conference