

Notes from our visit to OPRF, 11/28/07

Morning meeting with Bernie Heidkamp:

- Their ideal class size for American Studies is 40. They've had up to 50 in the past.
- Bernie's approach is essentially "chronothematic" – a chronological approach that emphasized themes per each unit.
- The junior honors track is the AP class. Most of the kids in A.S. are lower achieving.
- There's a greater expectation for more uniformity in their AP curriculum.

Morning observation: Staszak/Swope class

- **Room observations:** It's a relatively small classroom, and they didn't have to break down the wall for more room because of their great class size. I'm sure this contributed to the active nature of the class.
- **First half** of the class was English with the social studies teacher serving in a supportive role.
- I counted about 20 kids in the class.
- The class started with writing prompt designed to generate discussion (collected – worth 25 points).
- One teacher got the students started on the prompt while the other teacher helped get kids going.
- They wrote for 7 minutes.
- The "seed maker" activity followed, which was essentially an activity designed to generate discussion on the reading for that day around the questions and observations students made from their reading for that day. (The book was *The Known World*, by Edward P. Jones.)
- It was a very structured activity – students were given points for participation, and by the end of the first half of class, the teachers nearly got around to every student.
- The English teacher also highlighted the skills kids were using in the discussion (prediction skills, for example).
- The social studies teacher basically served in a supportive role: kept kids on task, praised students for responses, etc.
- While this was somewhat of a parallel approach, each teacher was clearly working in concert so that they could meet the goals of the class.
- Kids were very active and made references to other student's comments – great class! I think this class speaks to the importance of using texts kids are interested in. They seemed very engaged.
- Harold made an interesting "connections" comment to earlier texts they studied (Frost and Thoreau), as well as a modern-day parallel comment.
- By the end of class, every student participated – is this possible with 45-50 kids??
- **Second half** of class resumed after a 5 minute break. Kids watched a video that was similar in content to the material covered in the first half of class (Lincoln's emancipation Proclamation and the build up to the Civil War).
- Kids filled out a guide as they watched the video.

- There was no mention that this was the "history" side of class – they just moved into the content.
- The social studies teacher emphasized the "facts" and "assessments" skill work they completed as they were working through the discussion of the video: "what are the facts we know?"..."how can we assess those facts?"
- In many of their unit booklets, I noticed that modern day parallels and issues seemed to show up frequently. Isn't this something that's integral to an American Studies course? The notion of *using* the artifacts from the class?
- The social studies teacher focused more on causes leading up to the war, rather than the details of the war. Perhaps this is also something true of Am. Studies – because of the importance of making material "connect," the material studied must be more *general*, in some senses – we can't spend a lot of time covering the details of all the specific battles, etc. (Unless, of course, there's a literature connection.) Aren't "big ideas" and "connections" more important than minutia?
- After the video, students paired up and completed some group work from their packet. Their group work looked very similar to ours – groups finishing at different times, quality of discussion varies, teachers made their way around to the different groups to contribute and listen.
- Instructional note: for this team, teachers didn't "chime in" while the other was teaching. Their collaboration was truly *supportive* rather than *simultaneous*. After class, they mentioned that they tried more of a simultaneous approach in the past, but it just didn't work for their styles. They've been teaching together for five years.

A possible team-teaching model:

STARTING POINT

GOAL

MID POINT

A few typical models:

a.) Parallel instructional approaches

a.) Parallel

b.) Parallel content with some integrated instances

a.) Integrated instruction

b.) Integrated

(Basically there are some gaps between the content and whether or not it connects across the disciplines.)
being taught by two teachers working

b.) Integrated content

(All the content is

(Everything seems like "one class"

in concert.)

*Note: With this model, *time* is the most important factor. A team can't make progress if they don't have a great deal of time together. Teams need an opportunity to evolve.

Second Meeting with Bernie:

- Bernie said that there really isn't much collaboration across teams at OPRF. The majority of the collaboration is within teams. He also mentioned that the CASE conference is where he gets a great deal of collaboration. Due to CASE, he doesn't feel like he teaches in a vacuum.
- Any collaboration that happens across teams is informal collaboration.
- Logistically, there's just a ton of work to make time to collaborate across teams.
- They have a shared file source, but people don't seem to use it very much.
- He mentioned that if it were an honors course, there would be more collaboration (interesting!!).
- He also mentioned that most of the teams feature seasoned teachers, so this might be a reason why there is less collaboration.
- ****Great comment:** the nature of the course is that it inherently features and fosters freedom. There are many ways to approach the questions/inquiry at the heart of the course, so this naturally assumes a great deal of freedom. The course just doesn't lend itself to an overly structured, dictated approach. (For example, with the emphasis on modern-day application, we can't predict what will happen in the future, so just with this element of the course there's an unpredictable element.)
- One of Bernie's goals is to encourage students to take an *active* role in their culture. They write many cultural analyses and evaluate American ideology on a regular basis. This is another example of *using* the content from the course.
- He highlighted that the course is inquiry based.
- Something else that came up as we chatted: should we argue that looking at modern-day parallels is something intrinsic to the course?
- He likes the chronological approach because he found the *students* wanted it. They seemed to like the structure and narrative of a chronological approach.
- Context can always be filled in, but the chronological approach seems to offer it implicitly.
- We can always fill in chronology when we need it, anyway. It shouldn't be set up as a context/chronology approach versus an inquiry/thematic approach.
- Question for Bernie: "How did you learn to teach this course?"
 - o It was basically a "sink or swim" approach and they evolved a common approach over time.
 - o He met with veteran teachers, got their stuff as models, and went from there.
 - o He argues that they have a "collaboration without pressure" model at OPRF.
 - o He also made this **interesting comment:** *I don't know if we know where we're going with Am. Studies here.* (Interesting!)
 - o He argue that without the pressure to collaborate, shouldn't we be more open to it? If there's no pressure, then shouldn't collaboration be more meaningful?
 - o It's enough work to collaborate across two *people*. When you also need to collaborate across *teams*, this is even more time intensive.
 - o He asked if it's possible to set up a "collaborative model."

Afternoon observation: Heidkamp/Schwartz class

- **Room observations:** They broke down the wall separating the two "normal" sized classrooms, but still pushed the students to primarily one side of the larger room. There were about 30 kids in the class.
- **First half** of the class was social studies with the English teacher serving as more of an integral part of the instruction. Kids were seated in a square and teachers were at corners of the square. There wasn't a traditional "front" of the room.
- The ss teacher made reference to a modern-day parallel to start the class (presidential election blog assignment). Both teachers "tag-teamed" some student questions on the blog assignment. It clearly seemed to be a team-designed assignment.
- SS teacher led a document-analysis activity for the first ½ of the class and the English teacher made supporting comments and "chimed in" and made clarifications when appropriate.
- The teacher not leading the lesson also completed some of the "supportive" activities (keeping kids on tasks, etc.) the teachers shared in the first observation.
- There were some really nice instances of "across teacher" dialogue during this class. They also had some mild debate, and a tangent discussion, too.
- The skills Steve highlighted were "agency" and "oppression" comments per each document they read.
- There were definitely some signs of a lower-achieving class: heads down on the desk, for example.
- **Second half** of the class was English led – they discussed *Huck Finn*, and the ss teacher did all the same things the English teacher did from the first 1/2w of class.
- One student made a great "connections" comment to modern-day media.
- They also made an interesting interdisciplinary connection regarding the use of dialect in Jim's character and a document from the first ½ of class.
- They also had an interesting discussion on the "n-word" in class – much more interesting than our discussions because this class was actually diverse, as opposed to NT.

Conclusions from our OPRF day:

- How can you standardize something that is inherently team driven, "messy" in a collaborative sense? Canned curriculum just doesn't work in this kind of setting.
- Innovation and flexibility lie at the heart of a collaborative, team-taught course. Why? Because there are compromises that must be made across the teams/teachers due to varying styles, areas of expertise and talents, as well as across the demands of the disciplines; there are a variety of ways to go about teaching American studies – an inquiry based course – because inquiry is naturally a "messy" approach because we can't truly predict the direction of the inquiry.
- We can't apply traditional attitudes of singleton, non-integrated and team taught classes towards a course like AIS. For example, take the question of whether AIS should be taught chronologically or thematically. The problem with assuming that the chronological approach is the best choice is that it assumes there's only one way

to do something. With a thematic approach, teachers *still* provide context. It's not a dichotomy – it's just organized in a different fashion. Much of the course design comes from an organic approach across the teaching team – they need to figure out what approach works best for them.

- Doesn't a top-down approach OR a "canned curricular" approach inhibit the work we do in AIS? For example, if each teacher is told he/she needs to make sure they address "coverage," then this will naturally lead to separate agendas, less collaboration, and less integration, possibly resulting in a very disparate approach.