

Making Sense of the World through Disciplinary Integration

(A case study on the use of Intra-disciplinary approach towards the study of humanities)

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Students often learn about the world around them by making connections. As such, when we teach our lessons through individual subjects, it is essentially compartmentalizing and providing organization to the knowledge around us. However, in reality, humans do not digest information in this manner. Connections are often made across subjects to make sense and provide practical applications to our lives.

As such, since 2009, Beatty Secondary School has been adopting an intradisciplinary approach towards our lower secondary humanities curriculum. When teachers integrate sub-disciplines under a subject area, for example, social studies, history and geography under a humanities programme, we are using an intradisciplinary approach. In Beatty, the humanities department has embarked on integrating the teaching of History and Geography to achieve the following objectives:

1. allow students to see the inter-connectedness and inter-relationships between geography and history in the world around us
2. foster collaborative learning skills
3. apply creative and critical thinking skills

The theme of <Rivers> was chosen as the platform to integrate the secondary one curriculum to provide them with the following enduring understanding:

1. to see that the relationship between man and nature is a dynamic one
2. nature must be protected to ensure the survival of man
3. a river can shape the economic development of a country

Once the theme on Rivers was selected, teachers sat together to plan lessons, assignments and learning journeys that works towards designing an Integrated Humanities package that lasts 10 weeks/ one term. Under this package, teachers continue to teach their respective geography and history lessons but at the designated time, an integrated lesson will be conducted by either the geography and history teacher. Having agreed to integrate the topic of Rivers, the challenge was to plan a comprehensive lesson package that provided sufficient coverage to both subjects and make learning meaningful for our students. Adjustments also have to be made to

the existing scheme of work (SOW) such that the topics coincide with each other and are taught concurrently. The topic of Rivers and Environments typically taught in chapter 10 of the secondary one Geography textbook was brought forward so that it could be taught concurrently with chapter 3 Birth of Civilisations in Ancient History.

Under geography, students learn about the river system, drainage basin, features formed by rivers and the impact of rivers on people. On the history side, students learn about the rise of civilizations and their link to rivers.

During our integrated humanities lesson, an integrated assignment was designed which allows the students to be exposed to both the aspects of the subjects. For example, in one of the integrated lessons helmed by the history teachers, a purposeful choice of using Egyptian jewellery as one of the sources in the source based question was made. The case study of the Egyptian River Nile was done in the Geography curriculum but was further expounded on by History teachers during the integrated lesson. The design of the assignment also took care of the critical thinking skills which we want our students to pick up. Questions were designed such that students tap on their inferential skills.

An example of one such question is shown in figure 1. In the question, students were asked what they can infer about the ancient Egyptian civilization from the jewellery. Through the use of the artefact, students were challenged into making valid, logical deductions about the civilization from the necklace.

The quality of answers given by the secondary one students did not disappoint us. Many marvelled at the high level of craftsmanship and use of beads and precious metal. Others went on to deduce that such jewellery was likely owned by the richer Egyptians and may also be used for religious or fashionable purposes.



Figure 1

Another highlight of our intra-disciplinary approach towards history and geography was our learning journey. The teaching of our integrated humanities lesson



Figure 2

culminated in one learning journey where we transferred our classroom outdoors. Needless to say, this proved to be a big hit with our students.

Singapore River was chosen to be the venue where the learning would take place. Our iconic river was ideal as it provides us with all that was necessary to communicate historical and geographical concepts to the students. From the maintenance of the river, its meander, its economic significance to the historical background led to the founding, growth and prosperity of our country.

Students were assigned a series of tasks to be completed which were related to geographical and historical concepts. The questions involved traditional pen-and-paper to drawing and IT usage. For example, in one of the questions, students were tasked to come up with a pose which involves them posing with the bronze sculptures installed along the Singapore River. Students came up with creative poses (refer to Figure 2) with the sculptures, such as acting in negotiation with the traders and helping a worker push his bullock cart. The students were then graded accordingly to the rubrics stated in the assignment. Such questions help students to develop historical empathy, which aids them in understanding history and the struggles of early immigrants.

Questions of such nature, according to our survey conducted with 57 students, proved to be the most popular. Another popular task was the introduction of the Singapore River where students brainstormed and presented a one-minute clip to introduce the River to an imaginary audience. Students came up with impressive clips on the spot and also had a platform to showcase their historical and geographical knowledge to the teachers. Students were also asked questions that require them to think about the economic impact of the river on Singapore. Questions pertaining to the types of businesses found along the river and their impact on Singapore were asked. Map reading skills (refer to Figure 3) were also tested in the learning journey as students were asked to pinpoint the buildings built along the river. Students were quizzed



Task 3
G10 – Commercial, Civic and Community Institution

Name these landmarks/buildings. [4m]

1. Bank A		1. Museum E	
2. Bank B		2. Building F	
3. Bank C		3. Building G	
4. Bank D		4. Building H	

Clue: Stand at Point X to locate Landmark A-H.

Figure 3

on why the two-storey shophouses were retained despite Singapore being land-scarce. Such questions challenge our students to weigh-in on the need to preserve our heritage as we zoom ahead in economic growth.

In all, an overwhelming 80% (57 students polled) of the students from strongly agree to agree that the integrated learning journey helped to reinforce their understanding of topics covered in class and they would recommend their classmates to go on a similar learning journey. The task of integrating two seemingly separate and distinct subjects has its benefits as this allows our students to have a broader perspective of issues and to let them see the importance of humanities subjects in our daily lives.