

WHOLE

SCHOOL

PROJECTS

ENGAGING IMAGINATIONS THROUGH
INTERDISCIPLINARY INQUIRY

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Introduction

“When God created the universe,” a teacher said to me recently, “she didn’t divide it into subjects.” The universe of knowledge, however, is almost invariably divided into the familiar set of subjects in the curriculum. There have been attempts to introduce children to knowledge of the world and human experience that avoid the usual divisions into subject areas (e.g., Postman & Weingartner, 1969), but none of them has really been entirely satisfactory and none has been sufficiently attractive that they have influenced the curriculum of typical schools. So we still find almost universally in schools the routine differentiation of knowledge into the subjects that are familiar to endless generations of students—math and history, biology and foreign languages, English/language arts and social studies, art and computer studies, and so on. Some divisions have to be made, of course, as one can’t simply take on the whole world of knowledge at one go, and the division into the traditional subjects seems also to have suggestive philosophical support, as in Hirst (1974).

The danger many people have pointed to in the subject-divided curriculum is that each subject comes to be seen by students not as a part of a whole, but somehow as distinct bits that never come together in any clear way in their minds. It’s the fragmentation of coherence that is seen as a problem of the subject-divided curriculum for many students.

Well, this is perhaps a rather labored way of introducing the purpose of this book. I want to propose a way of addressing this problem, but also a number of others that are produced by our current ways of organizing schools. Inadvertently, and too often unnoticed, aspects of current school organization diminish the educational experience they are designed to provide. Any organization, especially one as vast as our school systems, is bound to involve some compromises between administrative necessity and educational experience. Sometimes, though, the compromises are caused more by administrative convenience than ought to be the case, and when this does happen, a bit of ingenuity might enable us to preserve more of the educational value.

This book will describe a project that can add a lot more to schools' educational value than it costs in administrative inconvenience. Let me briefly sketch an outline of the Whole School Projects I am proposing and then I will look at other benefits and educational values that can result from them.

The idea is that each school will take on a particular topic to study for 3 years. The whole school will be involved in the study. The topic might involve local phenomena—such as “plants and animals of the desert” if the school is in Alamogordo, New Mexico; “sheep farming” if it is in Walworth, New Zealand; “water resources” if it is in West Vancouver, Canada; “the Columbia River Gorge” if it is near Portland, Oregon; “the castle” if it is in Ludlow, England; or “the Yarra River” if it is in Melbourne, Australia; or the natural and cultural environment of three or four blocks around the school if it is in a typical suburban setting. Alternatively, the study could involve quite distant things—such topics as “the solar system,” or “desertification and attempts to combat it,” “ocean life,” “migrating animals,” and so on.

All students and all classes will be involved. The rest of the curriculum will continue as it currently is, but some time—maybe no more than 1 or 2 hours each week—will be given during which students and teachers build their knowledge of the chosen topic, directed toward a large-scale final product. While the Whole School Project (WSP) is distinct from, and is in addition to, the regular curriculum, it can help achieve many of the year's curriculum objectives in mathematics, science, art, history, and so on. Any teacher can choose to incorporate his or her curriculum goals into the project study, even when those goals include meeting externally mandated achievement standards.

Ideally the “whole school” referred to is conceived as extending from the beginning of elementary school to the end of high school, though obviously such an ideal will be very rarely achievable. Most schools are elementary schools, middle schools, or high schools. One of the benefits of the Whole School Project comes from students of different ages working together on a common topic. The Whole School Projects will usually be run within an individual elementary, middle, or high school, acknowledging that high school administrators may initially think such projects are too much of a distraction from their tighter curricula constraints and exam schedules.

I will describe the plan in more detail in Chapter 2, after detailing the problems it can help solve in Chapter 1. In Chapter 3, I will step toward the reality of such projects on the ground, as it were, and describe three examples, two of which are currently under way and the third of which

is completed. I will largely use the words of teachers involved in them to give an image of how they work in practice. In Chapter 4, I will discuss what kinds of topics serve to provide an adequate Whole School Project for at least 3 years of study, listing a set of criteria that a suitable project will need to meet. Chapter 5 explores a number of practical matters concerned with getting such a project going and keeping students' interest sustained, especially as they might work in class groupings and in cross-age groupings. Chapter 6 looks at learning principles that will ensure the WSP engages students' imaginations in the process. In Chapter 7, I will consider some of the educational principles that support this kind of program and provide a sound educational foundation for it. I will conclude, in Chapter 8, by raising and responding to the main objections that I have heard or imagined may be brought up when implementing WSPs, and try to show that the apparent challenges posed by such projects are really not as daunting as they may initially seem to some people.

Here is a simple list of some of the benefits that I think implementing this kind of Whole School Project can achieve. I will explore these in detail later and suggest others. I will consider the benefits in terms of their potential contributions to the overall community of the school, to teachers, and, most important, to students.

Some benefits for the students:

- Students build an emotional and imaginative engagement in learning about the world and develop pride in the growth of the project.
- Students understand the gradual growth of something very big from many small contributions—"a stone upon a stone, a word upon a word."
- Students are exposed to new interests and to invigorating learning activities they might otherwise not experience.
- Students see how different "subjects" in school overlap and work together when used in a large-scale interdisciplinary project.

Some benefits for the teachers:

- Teachers collaborate in integrated planning and teaching with colleagues.
- Teachers experience a distinctive educational project with distinctive educational activities, in a context of mutual support.

- Teachers build a deeper sense of how distinct disciplinary perspectives can come together in a large-scale interdisciplinary project.

Some benefits for the overall community of the school:

- WSPs contribute powerfully to community building within the school.
- WSPs help students, teachers, and administrators discover how individual contributions to a coherent large-scale project can produce enormous results, helping all participants feel pride for more than just their own individual work.
- WSPs encourage appreciation for the abilities of others, enabling everyone involved to recognize that all kinds of learning styles, intelligence, and ability level can play an important part.

Large-scale projects in schools are hardly new, of course. But nearly all such projects that I am aware of focus on some social or behavioral purpose, such as ecological sustainability, eliminating drugs, prevention of bullying and other “antisocial” behavior, or art projects, health issues, recycling, and other worthy social goals. Also many schools adopt year-long themes of various kinds, which also overlap somewhat with this proposal. Typical themes, however, tend to be focused on some relevant social concern—environmental issues, aboriginal populations, behavioral problems, and so on—and they are very rarely expected to continue for more than a year. The kinds of projects I will propose are designed to contribute to educational purposes that are sometimes not adequately achieved in schools because of how schools are typically organized.

The time and resource costs of implementing such projects may seem daunting, especially to anyone who has never done one. How does one build something on this scale in a school whose organizational and other resources may be already stretched to the limit? I hope that by the end of the book, if you stick with me, it will be clear that the costs of such Whole School Projects need not be great, and the educational benefits to the students’ learning and the sense of community for the school as a whole far outweigh any costs. The hard part, as with most things, is beginning. But you’ve read this far, so let’s continue together.