

## Improve Your School's Approach to Cross-Curricular Collaboration

By Ava Javid () | Ideas & Best Practices (<https://blog.thinkcerca.com/topic/ideas-best-practices>) | August 10, 2017

*Avoid barriers to effective collaboration with these helpful tips*



When the school bell rings in the morning, everyone in the building hurries to their designated areas; admins to their offices, teachers to their classrooms, and students to their assigned seats. Amid the hustle of the school day, it's easy for silos to exist between content areas. Rather than having students rotate from subject to subject, classroom to classroom, instructor to instructor with little to no crossover between them, schools should mimic and prepare students for what's beyond hallways and classrooms (<http://blog.ed.ted.com/2015/08/25/does-school-prepare-students-for-the-real-world-this-teen-speaker-says-no/>).


Cross-curricular or integrated instruction between content areas helps students to see topics as interdependent and connected (<http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/103011/chapters/What-Is-Integrated-Curriculum%C2%A2.aspx>) rather than individual, isolated subjects. Integrated instruction empowers students to achieve higher levels of critical thinking while also developing their collaboration skills. In addition, this type of instruction creates an open and shared environment between professionals, which increases schoolwide understanding of students' needs.

Studies have shown that cross-curricular collaboration is best performed through better communication between teachers ([http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/media/users/xr1/CoTeaching/Collaboration\\_\\_Co-Teaching\\_-\\_Chapter\\_Summaries\\_1-8\\_12\\_2015.pdf](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/media/users/xr1/CoTeaching/Collaboration__Co-Teaching_-_Chapter_Summaries_1-8_12_2015.pdf)), administrative support, and planning time. However, as with any implementation, several things can stand in the way.

### Time

Sometimes teachers aren't given enough time and space to implement collaborative strategies. Strategic planning takes time and thoughtful

consideration. But time spent collaborating on unit planning, aligning on student needs, and developing personal and professional relationships with colleagues can all have a significant impact on student outcomes. This isn't to say that cross-curricular collaboration is more time-consuming, but time is required to build a foundation that wholly supports students, teachers, and admins.

 **STUDENT**  
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**What to do:** Start by incorporating other subjects into your own instruction. For example, a class studying astronomy can use history-based models as their application for the principles. Or take a tip from this social studies teacher at Healy Elementary who collaborated with an English language arts colleague ([//blog.thinkcerca.com/stories-classroom-observations-healy-elementary-school](https://blog.thinkcerca.com/stories-classroom-observations-healy-elementary-school)) on a ThinkCERCA poetry lesson, which had students explore the harsh realities of the Civil War.

### Teacher Readiness

Not only does cross-curricular collaboration for teachers require time, but lack of resources and more training can turn educators away from the idea before it can even be implemented. The current constructs of 40-minute classes, a textbook-driven curriculum, and the preference to stay within the scope of their expertise can impact teachers' ability to participate in innovative cross-curricular work.

**What to do:** Create an integrated lesson plan with a partner. Find colleagues you are already acquainted with, become familiar with their content areas, and see how your subjects align. Collaboration can take many forms. For example, partnering with another teacher to cover the same theme or skills is a method commonly incorporated between English and history. (<http://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/integrated-curriculum.pdf>) Furthermore, partnering with someone more knowledgeable on other subject matter will decrease the time it takes to create cross-curricular lesson plans.

### Student Readiness

As every educator knows, students do not learn at the same pace in each subject. And simply exposing them to cross-curricular settings may not guarantee their success. Differentiated instruction should still be applied to cross-curricular instruction. Additionally, one of the struggles that teachers must acknowledge is that there may be significant gaps in students' background knowledge. Just as teachers take the time to prepare themselves for a co-teaching relationship, student preparation is just as necessary.

**What to do:** Research shows (<https://support.thinkcerca.com/hc/en-us/articles/235093168-Teaching-Resource-The-Debate-Game>) that students also learn from their peers. Provide opportunities for peer learning by strategically partnering them with others who can lead conversations, share skills, and support building their background knowledge. This could be through routines, such as Jigsaw, Last Word, or World Cafe. Group settings are powerful when its use is planned carefully, and when the learning it promotes is evaluated.

To get started, establish a set of group norms (<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/deeper-learning-collaboration-key-rebecca-alber>) or agreements. This will give each student a voice and provide accountability for all. Assigning roles in a group setting can be incredibly helpful when monitoring multiple groups in one classroom. For example, if students are working in groups of four reading and analyzing a news article, you may ask each group to pick an investigator, a recorder, a discussion director, and a reporter. For the group to be successful, each child must complete the tasks that accompany his/her role.

Be sure to model how you want students to participate. When responding to answers, mimic the respect and sensitivity that you want the students to display towards their classmates. Also, acknowledge and value opinions different from your own. Be open to sharing your own stories, critiquing your work, and summarizing what has been said.

### Lack of Resources

Sometimes there are no standard rubrics across content areas, so the language used may vary from subject to subject. Classrooms and schools need tools that support collaboration and instruction for learning by engaging teachers and peers.

**What to do:** Provide teachers with a common language to use, such as the CERCA Framework, across content areas. A standardized approach to teaching across classes is essential in improving student achievement. This allows students to hear the same language in every class.

With resources like ThinkCERCA the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences was able to collaborate across content areas to personalize literacy instruction, prepare students for new standards and assessments, and improve student outcomes. As a result, the English classes that regularly used ThinkCERCA grew their scores by an average of 3.4 points on the ACTs (<https://thinkcerca.com/case-study-cross-curricular-literacy-instruction-prepare-students-standards-assessments/>) compared to 2.1 for the classes that did not use it regularly.

Cross-curricular collaboration takes hard work and school-wide effort to truly improve student outcomes and create an open and shared environment between professionals. However, it invigorates the curriculum with real-world relevance, sparking students' desire to fully understand and connect their world with what they've learned.