Teaming Up to Become Tech Prep and Career Path Ready

Teachers at Tumwater High School in Washington State were alarmed by the increase in apathy they were seeing among freshman students. Fearing a pattern was developing that could lead to frustration and failure down the line, they wanted to do something quickly, or else risk losing these young people over the next four years.

Six concerned teachers responded to a request by administrators for people to take part in an interdisciplinary experiment. Stimulated by a desire to incorporate more of a School-to-Work focus and implement a Tech Prep pathway, the school was ready for some changes.

"We came together as three English and three business teachers, in the hopes that we could make a difference," English teacher Scott Hess told us. "Our hearts were in it from the very beginning."

The result of their collaboration was a fully integrated, blocked and team-taught, ninth grade Applied English and Technology class. The program was so successful, that in 1994, it won the Washington Educators Association's "Leaders in Restructuring Award" for innovative programs developed "from the bottom up" in a site-based setting.

The Missing Link

Some members of the newly formed team had attended a workshop by William Glasser, author of several popular books on student motivation. His student-centered approach inspired them and guided the development of their plan.

"Glasser talked about getting into a student's 'quality world' -- what the student sees as important -- and how a teacher must become a part of that world to have any impact," Scott recalled.

"So we asked ourselves: What was in a student's 'quality world?' We all agreed that students are concerned about their futures. We also knew that when students don't get the link between reading, writing and math, and what kinds of opportunities they will have in the future, they lose motivation and have a hard time focusing. We decided it was our job to make that missing link very clear."

A search began for materials that would help the teachers to accomplish their mission. "We found that the *Career Choices* curriculum did a good job, in a very direct way, to help students see the link between what they learned in school and the rest of their lives," Scott told us. "Students could see the logic in many of the activities, especially the budget exercise (Chapter 4) and the work values survey (Chapter 2), and understand how these experiences could be important for them down the road a bit. Also, we thought the curriculum would have an appeal because of its student-friendly presentation."

Building a Team

Choosing a curriculum, it turned out, was the easy part. The challenge of building a strong, cohesive team still lay ahead. Looking back, they could see their success depended on a number of essential factors:

1. Bridging differences between the disciplines. This was difficult at first, because teachers came from diverse backgrounds and ideologies. But the motivation to cooperate was strong. Scott told us that "business teachers wanted more content in their curriculum, and English teachers wanted more access to technology." Both groups' needs would be satisfied by bringing these two elements together in one program.
2. Having enough experienced teachers involved. Since the new class was targeted at the largest group of students, most of whom were resistant to a traditional curriculum, administrators tended to assign less experienced teachers. But the team wanted at least some experienced teachers who already had expertise and familiarity with the curriculum. They fought to get approval and won. "It had a great deal to do with our success," Scott reports, "that we weren't all first-year teachers."
3. Creating a common "prep" period. Initially, this was a problem because it required changes in the master schedule. But the teachers were persistent and managed to convince administrators that a common "prep" period was vital for continued team interaction and support. Now, meeting every day after lunch for five minutes, or sometimes the whole hour, the team maintains enthusiasm and stays on track. Administrators were pleased because it meant they could drop by and brainstorm about student problems or concerns.

If scheduling ever became too difficult, Scott told us, the program would go to a school-within-a-school setting with its own class hours, as is done in other schools with interdisciplinary classes. "We are determined to maintain the integrity of the program, even if it means broad, sweeping changes in the school," he affirmed.

4. Developing a familiarity base. In spite of losing half its members after the first year, a strong bond of familiarity and friendship kept the team functioning smoothly. "When teachers leave, programs often dissolve because there's no familiarity base." Scott said. "That hasn't been our case at all."
The key was to involve the team in every aspect of the program, including the hiring and training process. When three teachers left, the remaining ones paired up with the new teachers and got them ready over the summer. "We met at different members' homes, shared meals, and planned curriculum updates and revisions," Scott told us. As a result, friendships developed, and when the second year began, the program picked up with the same excitement and effectiveness as before.

Innovative Features

The award winning Applied English and Technology program is now offered as an elective to freshman on a trimester basis. Many of the innovative features the team worked so hard to implement are now in place, and the benefits are visible to both teachers and students.

Team teacher Sharon Cratsenberg explained how the adjoining room arrangement allows her greater creativity in planning lessons and activities: "I can keep my students for two hours depending on what we're doing. Or, both teachers can put them together for a video, or create a mutual assignment, with some in each room working on it. There are lots of different possibilities. The fun is that both teachers see the full picture and learn about each other's disciplines."

Sharon also speaks well of the "applied" approach to keyboarding. Students now practice on reports and exercises generated in English, instead of meaningless keyboarding exercises. "They have more pride in their work, and it's neater than in the past," she reported. "They do everything from acrostic poems to reports on careers, using the different computer programs for word processing, spreadsheeting, publishing and presentation software."

Using the computer program PowerPoint, each student created a series of 12 slides about a chosen career. By incorporating graphics, word processing, and other elements in the process, a colorful, sound and motion "advertisement" was displayed. Communications became personal and interactive when students viewed and evaluated the displays, and then wrote up their positive comments in a formal business letter to send to those whose work they had selected.

Summing up the progress of the last two years, Scott commented: "Everyone likes teaching so much more now, even those who taught the honors English in the past." Department Chairs in both disciplines prefer to teach the new class because "it no longer involves cramming information down students' throats that they're reluctant to learn." Scott believes that students are now seeing the "missing link" and, as a result, are less apathetic and more enthusiastic learners.

"Real-life" Exposure

Students benefit when from the "real-life" exposure they get when people from local businesses come into the classroom to talk about jobs and careers. Recently, an employer panel provided a forum for students to ask questions about workplace experiences.

"It was tremendous," Scott reported. "The employers loved coming in and loved that we have a career-oriented curriculum. They were impressed when students knew all the right kinds of questions to ask about attitudes and problems in the workplace." This was an awareness, Scott points out, that developed because the *Career Choices* curriculum highlighted those issues. "Employers told us they're glad we're doing a better job addressing business concerns in the classroom," he told us.

An apprenticeship program is another element that brings school and the business community closer together. Students can sign-up to spend a day at a business they're interested in working at, or they can "job shadow" through the semester and even into the summer. (*Career Choices* shows how to set up such a program in the Instructor's and Counselor's Guide). Students appreciate these opportunities to identify careers they might enjoy, and even have a passion for.

"For everyone involved, this is a totally new focus in education," Scott told us. "Instead of having a broad-based, general kind of education, now people can see how learning applies specifically to students' futures."

Becoming "Tech Prep Ready"

Tumwater High School is making steady progress towards implementing a full Tech Prep setting, and the Applied English and Technology program demonstrate many of the features that make a school "Tech Prep ready": integration of academics with vocational subjects, collaborative teaching teams, comprehensive career guidance, blocks of longer time periods, and applied rather than theoretical approaches in the classroom. In another year, when articulation agreements are in place with local community colleges, college credit will be available for students in Tech Prep classes.

Because of their tremendous success, the Tumwater team now travels nationwide to help other schools set up similar programs. Their presentations feature students' computer-generated work, along with videos from the classroom, to demonstrate how team teaching and integration process work. Participants get plenty of hands-on instruction in many of same activities that students do.

Other teachers who are part of the team are: Kirk Stevens, English; Pam Serne, Technology; Mark Zarate, Technology; Evonne Iriarte, English; and Sharon Cratsenberg, Technology.

Keys to Successful Teamwork

1. Bridge ideological differences by emphasizing how both groups' needs will be satisfied. Find a common philosophy that guides your project.
2. Make sure enough experienced teachers are involved who have some expertise and familiarity with the curriculum. Request that administration assign a balance of experienced teachers to the team.
3. Create a common "prep" period for teachers to meet regularly and stay on track. Overcome scheduling difficulties by moving to a school-within-a-school setting, if necessary.
4. Develop a familiarity base to ensure that the program continues in spite of staffing changes. Involve team members in all aspects, including hiring and training.